Masculinity in two reddit men's communities: Feminism is foul, privilege is precarious, and being beta is bad.

by

Luc S. Cousineau

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Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner .... **Adrienne Massanari**
Associate Professor, Communication
University of Illinois Chicago

Supervisor .... **Corey W. Johnson**
Professor, Recreation and Leisure Studies
Faculty of Health
University of Waterloo

Internal Member.. **Diana C. Parry**
Professor, Recreation and Leisure Studies
Faculty of Health
University of Waterloo

Internal-External Members .... **Jennifer R. Whitson**
Associate Professor, Sociology and Legal Studies
Faculty of Arts
University of Waterloo

Daniel Cockayne
Assistant Professor,
Geography and Environmental Management
Faculty of Environment
University of Waterloo

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

TL;DR

Work, social lives, and leisure practices are increasingly digitally mediated, and as more and more of our interactions move online, we seek out platforms and communities where we can share ideas and interact with others. Social networking sites, forums, and other socially oriented digitally networked spaces have created opportunities for communities of shared interest to come together, permitting even the smallest of interest groups to feel as though they have a home and meeting place. One location where this kind of community formation happens readily is reddit.com, a website designed to aggregate content from users and other websites into interest-based collections. Users can join and follow communities about nearly any topic, and curate their experience to show only content that aligns with their beliefs, ideologies, or desires. Along with social groups like fan fiction writers or bird watchers, the ease of gathering and sharing ideas on social platforms like reddit has allowed other niche groups with anti-equity, far-right, and prejudicial views to find community as well. In the case of men's advocacy and male supremacist groups, this has led to reddit communities in the online manosphere.

The manosphere is a loose collection of anti-feminist groups that share a focus on aspects of men's rights, Western gender traditionalist, or male supremacist ideology. As a set, manosphere group ideologies are less of a continuum from mundane to militant, but rather like a loose collection of affiliated groups. Each manosphere group carries its own understandings about men and masculinities, and these are reflected in the ways these groups welcome (or do not welcome) men representing different versions of masculinity, and accept them as group members and/or as men. With a complicated history, growing numbers, and in some cases feminist roots, the manosphere and its popular constituent groups require examination.

The purpose of this research was to explore the discourses of masculinity in two different sub-groups of the manosphere, to compare them, and gain insight into how those discourses influence community ideology. Using digital ethnographic methods, this research examines the discourses of masculinity in the /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill sub-communities of the website reddit.com this research engages the following research questions: What discourses of masculinity are embedded in the reddit manosphere spaces of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, how do they compare, and how are these discourses disseminated and monitored to maintain collective group ideologies? And What role might reddit play, through /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, in connecting manosphere communities, and pushing users toward more radical viewpoints about gender and power? The ongoing act of conducting this research in a digital setting also generated a third question: What indicators or guideposts would have been useful as a novice digital qualitative researcher to help me better plan, develop, conduct, and theorise my digital ethnographic research?

The introductory chapters introduce the area of study, reddit, and the men's rights movement, as well as share the theoretical perspectives and methodological approach that frame the project. These chapters are followed by three manuscripts that present empirical refractions based on my research, as well as the development of a digital ethnographic theory-method. The first manuscript chapter, *"Entitled to everything responsible for nothing:" Gendered Discourses of Antifeminism, Biological Determinism, and Violence in Reddit's Manosphere*, explores how the three mainstays of antifeminism, biological determinism, and violence provide covert and

overt support for men's rights and supremacist rhetorics on reddit. In this chapter I examine how these discourses are gendered to contrast 'natural' male superiority with the perception of male subordination in a feminist society. The second manuscript, *"A Positive Identity for Men"? Pathways to far-right participation through /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill*, positions reddit's affordances as important contributors to community proliferation. Using the shared ideological commitment to gendered traditionalism of these two reddit communities, and Francisco Bobbio's (1996) explication of the left-right political spectrum, this manuscript positions /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill as far-right communities. Touching on the hard and soft misogyny of these communities as entry points into ideological pipelines, it locates reddit as a perpetuating force for far-right conversion and progression. The third manuscript is a refraction of my methodological struggles in collection of empirical materials, and the theoretical development of a way to think through the complexity of doing research in digitally mediated contexts. *Application of a Digital Ethnographic Assemblage Theory-Method – the Research Technoassemblage* explores the challenges of using ethnographic methods in online-only communities and the messy intersections of technological systems, people behind the users, the person behind the researcher, and our (presumed) willful ignorance of that complexity. It concludes with a call for research that recognizes and better addresses the need to see and understand these complexities in all research with digitally mediated components. I conclude with a reflection on where to go from here, stepping forward with this research into continued exploration of digital complexity and how it affects gender, masculinities, and men's rights groups.

The final chapter brings together the introductory chapters and manuscripts, and reviews their contributions to the study of men's rights, far-right, and manosphere communities, as well as leisure and leisure research. It re-situates the importance of studying contentious groups like those studied here, and re-positions me as a researcher relative to the groups that I study. It concludes with reflections for leisure researchers to consider, as well as avenues for future inquiry that were illuminated by the findings from this study, including: the need for more Canadian-focused study of manosphere and far-right groups; the need to better study and map masculinities within the manosphere; the need to interrogate and work with empathy as a researcher of contentious worldviews; and a call to be more thorough and considered when conducting research in and on online communities.

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There are so many people to acknowledge and thank as I come to the end of this journey…and it has been a journey. I will start with the two people who have been my most consistent supporters and encouragers through the ups and downs, happiness, and sadness of this process: my partner Shannon, and my supervisor Corey Johnson. Over the years I have devoted to this endeavor you have both, in your own ways, made sure that I could keep moving forward. You celebrated my victories with me. You reminded me that I can't always win everything.

Shannon, you loved me through this whole mess, and told me that I am never allowed to write comprehensive exams again (fine by me).

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I owe very special academic thanks to my mother and long-suffering copyeditor. Thank you.

My non-academic support system has been essential, especially my ever-loving and supportive parents who are my greatest champions, and Randy, who doesn't care what I do as long as I take him to the park and give him pets. My friends who have no interest in academia but acknowledge what I do as important – you are real people and keep me grounded. Never Change.

I will end my acknowledgements by coming back to my partner, Shannon. A lot has happened since I started grad school, and you have been my support throughout all the great highs and terrible lows. You continue to be uncharacteristically upbeat about my job prospects and I can't thank you enough. You also produced the best human on earth.

Thank you for believing in me.

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Dedication

To my tiny human. I do this work so that, hopefully, you won't have to.

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"So the 'glass ceiling' is probably due to inferior intelligence and logic in girls, rather than discrimination or lack of opportunity."

"High-level intellectual activity is related to testosterone."

<div align="right">

- The manifesto of Roy Den Hollander

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In the summer of 2020, a 69-year-old White[1] male lawyer with terminal cancer shot and killed a 20-year-old man and gravely wounded his father in the front doorway of their New Jersey home. Dressed as a FedEx delivery person, the gunman shot both men, then fled. He would later take his own life in New York state. Daniel and Mark Anderl were the son and husband of US federal Judge Esther Salas, and at the time of the shooting the motives were unclear.

It was revealed later that the gunman's name was Roy Den Hollander, and he had a case pending before Salas addressing the idea of discrimination against men in the United States mandatory selective service enrollment (i.e., the male-only military draft). Den Hollander was an active men's rights advocate, bringing several cases against universities and public policies he saw as disproportionately advantaging women over men in the United States. Den Hollander's website, still active in February of 2021 (http://www.roydenhollander.com) describes him as the "Anti-Feminist Lawyer," and opens with the tag line "Now is the time for all good men to fight for their rights before they have no rights left" (Den Hollander, 2021). The site provides the details of the cases he brought as a men's rights attorney, his resume, and a link to been-scammed.com – a website calling itself an organization and a forum that "means to communicate, enlighten, educate, and elucidate about the growing Feminazi tyranny over the minds of men and social institutions" (Been-Scammed.com, 2021). Been-scammed.com has very little content, and the only identifying information available about who runs the site is an email address, the same address that can be found as the contact link on Den Hollander's own website. Been-Scammed.com also contains a link to Den Hollander's book, *Stupid Frigging Fool*, which rails against "a system infected with feminism."

Den Hollander's overt physical violence in shooting the Anderls is not the norm for those engaged with men's rights activism, but he is also not alone. Two of the most widely recognized

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[1] I capitalise White throughout this document as I agree with Nell Irvin Painter (2011, 2020) that the racial identity of Whiteness is too easily ignored, even as its influence is significant and pervasive.

mass murders in modern Canadian history[2] were committed by men who identified somewhere on the anti-feminist spectrum that includes men's rights activists: The Toronto van attack where a misogynist incel drove a rented van into a crowd of pedestrians killing 10 and injuring 16; and the Montreal massacre where an angry young man killed 14 women and injured 14 others. While neither man was the same type of devoted men's rights activist as Den Hollander, in both cases, the murders, like Den Hollander's, were motivated by a damaged kind of entitlement guaranteeing men access to power, control, women, and sex (Cousineau, 2021c).

The Toronto van attack propelled discussion of violent men's public action, and the importance/dangers of the internet, into the Canadian consciousness in a spectacular and terrible way. But Canada has a history of gender-motivated anti-feminism and violence against women. The most significant (deadly) single act of violent anti-feminist backlash occurred December 6th, 1986, when a man armed with a semi-automatic rifle and a hunting knife entered the Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal and systematically killed 14 women, and injured 10 women and 4 men to 'fight feminism.' The perpetrator of the Montreal Massacre had been unable to secure a spot in the engineering program at the school and blamed, at least in part, women like the ones that he gunned down for taking his 'rightful' spot. It was later revealed that the gunman was denied entry to the engineering program not because of a lack of space, but rather that he was not qualified for entry and was missing many of the required prerequisite courses. Like many of the violent offenders that would come after him, rather than blame the deep systemic and socio-cultural constructs that permitted/denied him something, he took aim at available and defenseless targets: the women engineering students he believed had wronged him. The perpetrator of the Montreal Massacre blamed his perceived disadvantage and lost entitlement (Manne, 2020) on feminism, and decided that the best way to show his anger was murder. While the man who committed the 1989 Montreal murders was not a known part of the men's rights movement at the time, it is a reasonable assumption that he might have been involved in men's activist groups online had the opportunity been available to him. Like others that have followed in his wake, he felt spurned by women and changing social conventions, believed that he was disadvantaged

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[2] I am purposefully excluding the acts of state-sanctioned genocide committed against indigenous people in Canada through the residential school and reserve systems (both historical and current) to make a point about violent men's activists. The brutality and atrocity should not be forgotten or diminished, nor should the continued calls for accountability in these deaths – something which is not lacking in the examples that I provide where non-indigenous Canadians were killed.

because of his identity as a man, and blamed feminism for issues that have roots not in feminist actions but rather in the long and oppressive histories of patriarchal domination, entitlement, and false power-sustaining traditionalisms. I choose to highlight Den Hollander's violence at the opening of this chapter because he was a men's rights activist (rather than a misogynist incel or other radical) and still committed murder. The use of violence as a social weapon is not exclusive to extremists.

The most public violence perpetrated by members of the manosphere[3] has come at the hands of misogynist incels,[4] and only a very small percentage of men who identify as men's rights activists (like Den Hollander) have engaged in violence. So here, Den Hollander is an outlier. What is more typical about Den Hollander as a men's rights activist, however, is revealed in the content of his website and the rhetoric that appears on Been-Scammed.com. Focused on how feminism has brought about the downfall of society, Den Hollander frames men as *the* disadvantaged class, in need of unification and coordinated action to better their social position. Den Hollander provides a poorly formatted but jarring window into the minds of the most disaffected participants in the online men's groups that make up the manosphere.

My interest in men's groups and the rhetoric of men's rights, precedes Den Hollander's violence, but his story focuses in on why I think that investigating these spaces is important. An able bodied, married,[5] White man, Den Hollander's embodiment and public positionality do not set him apart as someone disaffected by "the system." He was not an incel, but clearly had challenges with progressive politics. He blamed his own failures, and difficulties encountered by other men, on systems overrun with politically correct feminist politics, and emasculated male allies of feminism. He saw issues that men face, real or imagined, as problems created by women and to benefit women – a zero-sum game for power and control. He wasn't (and isn't) alone.

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[3] *The manosphere* is a term used to describe a collection of anti-feminist men's groups. I will cover the manosphere is more detail later in this chapter.

[4] Incel is an abbreviation for involuntary celibate. Misogynist incels are a group of men who claim they are being denied their biological right to heterosexual sex, blame feminism for this affront to their entitlement, and condone violence against women (and some men) as a way to 'right these wrongs' (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).

[5] The actual details of Den Hollander's relationships are bit hard to parse out, but the troubling nature of his marriage to a Russian woman much younger than him is detailed in his book *Stupid Friggin Fool* – although the veracity of his claims cannot really be verified.

Tens of thousands of men agree,[6] in whole or in part, with Den Hollander's interpretation of the social structures of power, and their deleterious effects on men. We should ask why do these men feel this way? What is it about their identities, masculinity, or ideas of "being a man" that cause them to become involved in men's rights groups? What are the discourses of masculinity embedded in men's rights activist spaces?

How did we get here?

I took my first women's studies course in 2004. It would be easy enough to explain that I took that course (and continued to take women's and feminist studies courses) because I had a mother who was active in the second wave feminist movement. The ephemera from that involvement was on display in our home, and I was acutely aware from a young age in the 1980s of her involvement with Take Back the Night, women's support networks, and her position as head of computing and record keeping at Family and Children's Services. There were books that I did not understand on the shelf in her home office, and she took charge of the finances in our home. I saw my father do the grocery shopping, cook many, many meals, and be a consistent presence around the house. It would make sense that I took on the study of feminism to help understand how my childhood home was different from those of my friends, and to bring forward the kinds of equality and flexible gender boundaries that I experienced. But that is not why I did it. I did it because I was angry and infatuated with a friend of a friend.

This friend, we will call her Ashley, had recently moved from studying business to a women's studies program and, in what felt like overnight, had begun talking about patriarchy, privilege, gender, and equity. I was infatuated. She was fierce, intelligent, and energized by a new way of seeing the world. I also felt attacked. When she talked it seemed like she was talking about how men were bad, and how I was bad; I wanted to argue with her – nobody likes feeling attacked. But Ashley had a language that I did not understand, and I knew I could never win an argument with her about these ideas unless I could also speak the language she used. So, I found myself in an oddly shaped, windowless classroom at Simon Fraser University ready to learn a new language so that I could have (and win) an argument. Somewhere deep in my subconscious

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[6] This number is based on a conservative percentage of the number of subscribers to /r/MensRights (~300,000), and the fact that there are many other manosphere reddit groups and other websites that reach a wider audience. These numbers are also just on reddit, meaning that likely this number is extremely conservative given the fact that groups from the manosphere operate on a variety of third-party social platforms and operate their own platforms as well.

I probably also figured that I would get the girl too – that my stunning intellect and willingness to learn about feminism would woo her. I never did.

After my introductory course, I talked my way into an upper year intercultural gender masculinities course that included readings about the Hijrah in India and Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinities* (2019). I was *severely* out of my depth, but learned that there was much more to feminist theory than I thought. I left Simon Fraser after that year and enrolled at Lakehead University to pursue studies in outdoor recreation in the hopes of legitimating my work at summer camp. The outdoor program at Lakehead has a dual degree agreement with Women's Studies, and by the end of my first term I was enrolled in that program as well. The combination of those subject areas led me to combine feminist studies with my work in summer camping, and resulted in a study of gendered leadership expectations of summer camp staff (Cousineau & Roth, 2012). I also worked in residence during my time at Lakehead, and the gendered divisions of labour, along with the way my colleagues who identified as women were treated compared to me, led to questions about why? What structures made my job easier and theirs more difficult? And why would male students treat them with less respect? I knew the answer, that it was the sex and gender systems that we live under, but I was always left with questions about men, masculinity, and why?

After I graduated, I took full-time work running an outdoor centre, then as director of an overnight summer camp. All my supervisors in both cases were men, something that struck me as odd given that summer camps generally employ more women than men in non-director roles. Real questions about men, social power, and gendered systems really came to the fore for me as I worked for a large not-for-profit that will remain nameless. A registered charity focused on community and caregiving; the large staff of this organization was about 90 percent women. Women occupied all levels of employment and management, except for the very top. That position was occupied by a man who displayed the overt and unapologetic misogyny of a man who came of age in the late 1970s, best personified by Ben Affleck's character in the 1993 film *Dazed and Confused* (Linklater, 1993). His demeanor and presence in the space seemed almost antithetical to the mission and stated values of the organization, and his leadership (among other things) eventually drove me away from both the organization and overnight camping as a profession. The misogyny I witnessed in not-for-profit leadership pushed me into thinking about organizational culture, and back into the considerations about the systems that would allow men

(and in particular the leader of that not-for-profit) to maintain power and influence in spaces where they were so clearly unsuited. Mostly I wondered, "Who acts like that?" and "Why does he think that is ok?" There were scholarly answers in the texts I studied in my women's studies degree, but I found real answers on the internet.

I have been interested in computers for as long as I can remember. Like equity work, computers came into our home with my mother. A prodigious early user of personal and business computing in the public sector, my mother was proficient in DOS and led the computing division as part of her job. We had a modem before anyone else I knew, and I can remember dialing directly into the public library to search for books. I was too young to engage with the networked communities discussed by authors like Rheingold (1993) or Turkle (1995), but by the end of elementary school and into high school I had set up and maintained several *Geocities* webpages, teaching myself to code HTML, making text flash and other basic tricks. My computer use evolved over time to spending hours looking for interesting things on the early internet, including painfully slow-loading but very alluring inappropriate pictures. I built my own computers, and after high school with my first broadband connection, I worked with other young men to figure out a way to game the closed network our residence had to get the best download speed for movies, songs, games, and other things.[7] I spent a lot of time online then, sometimes spending all night lost in the corners of the internet you find at 4am on a Tuesday. I found a lot of hate online. Not for me – nobody could see you at that time unless you really wanted them to – but for others, and I learned that the internet is where people go to hate without the consequences – on the internet, nobody knows you're a dog (figure 1-1).[8] I also

Figure 1-1: On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog – meme, from awesomelytechie.com (2014)

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[7] Not that we chose to exclude the women we lived with, but given the variety of reasons provided by feminist internet and computing historians for women's passive and active exclusion from computer cultures (Abbate, 2012; Hicks, 2017; Margolis & Fisher, 2003), it is perhaps not surprising that our group was made up only of young men.

[8] A lot has changed in the 20-plus years since that time and this meme/idea (see next page) has taken on new life to help illustrate how dated these early conceptualizations of the internet are today. Even in 2014, Zeynep Tufekci said

found communities of interest; places where you could go to find interesting content, funny animations, and ways to waste time. My havens for time wasting changed periodically, but somewhere around 2009, they settled in on reddit and I have been a user ever since. On reddit I found communities and content of interest, and eventually communities that interested me because they bothered me.

When I decided to pursue my Ph.D., issues of men, privilege, and sex/gender systems were still top of mind, and I found that communities on reddit were actively engaged in discussions about these issues. But these discussions were anything but feminist, and the feelings these men were expressing were altogether opposite to what I had learned in women's studies, from my friends and peers that identified as women, and members of my own family. It felt like they hated feminism, and many of them seemed to hate women as well. As I read, some of their arguments felt compelling to me – not because I was drawn into the hatred, but because they took positions that I had never heard before, and some of them cited their sources. Why had I never heard or read these arguments before? Where were they coming from? Did they have merit? What was it about the internet and reddit that encouraged them?

"These days, the last thing a dog wanting to hide its canine nature would do is go online!" (2014, p. 17).
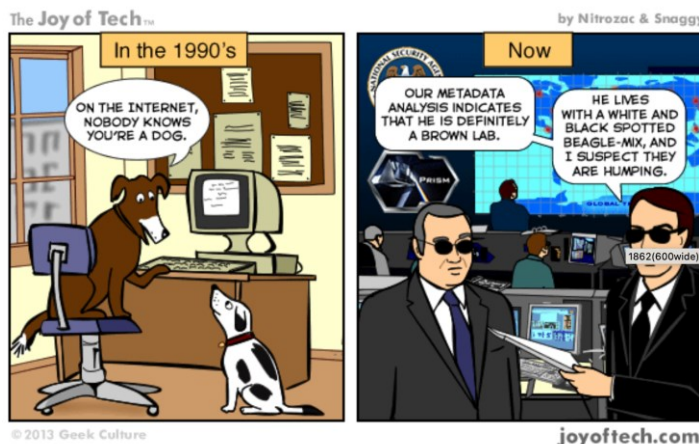
Where is "here" exactly?

What follows is an integrated dissertation that contributes to the growing discussions about men's rights groups and their current social-political influence through their participants. Using digital ethnographic methods, it explores two distinct, but connected, communities on the website reddit.com: /r/MensRights, and /r/TheRedPill.[9,10] This research is particularly concerned with discourses of masculinity and the ways that they are deployed by users, used to shape gendered configurations of practices, and used to affirm the narratives of Western gender traditionalism of late modernity. The next chapter will introduce the area of study, including sections on reddit.com and the men's rights movement. The setting chapter is followed by a chapter outlining the theoretical perspectives that frame the project. The fourth chapter will introduce the methodological approach for the research and discuss some of the challenges presented by doing this type of work.

The front-matter chapters are followed by the manuscripts that contribute empirical refractions of the research I conducted for this dissertation. The first, *"Entitled to everything responsible for nothing:" Gendered Discourses of Antifeminism, Biological Determinism, and Violence in Reddit's Manosphere*, explores how the three mainstays of antifeminism, biological determinism, and violence provide covert and overt support for men's rights and supremacist rhetorics on reddit. In this chapter I examine how these discourses are gendered to contrast 'natural' male superiority with the perception of male subordination in a feminist society. The second, *"Entitled to everything responsible for nothing:" Gendered Discourses of Antifeminism, Biological Determinism, and Violence in Two Communities of Reddit's Manosphere*, is a chapter that discusses reddit's potential role in the rise of the far-right. Using the shared ideological commitment to gendered traditionalism of these two reddit communities, and Francisco Bobbio's (1996) explication of the left-right political spectrum, it positions /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill as far-right communities. Touching on the hard and soft misogyny of these communities as entry points into ideological pipelines, it locates reddit as a perpetuating force

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[9] Reddit uses the designator /r/ in its web addresses to indicate that what follows is a sub-community of the site. For example, www.reddit.com/r/MensRights. The designator /u/ is also used and indicates the reddit page for a user's account. For example, www.reddit.com/u/GovSchwarzenegger is the user page for Arnold Schwarzenegger's popular reddit account.

[10] Although it is tempting to abbreviate items like /r/MensRights or /r/TheRedPill, like van Valkenburgh did to r/TRP, this is problematic, since /r/TheRedPill and /r/TRP are separate and distinct sub-communities.

for far-right conversion and progression. The third manuscript is a refraction of my methodological struggles in the collection of empirical materials, and the theoretical development of a way to think through the complexity of doing research in digitally mediated contexts. *Application of a Digital Ethnographic Assemblage Theory-Method – the Research Technoassemblage* explores the challenges of using ethnographic methods in online-only communities. It looks at the messy intersections of technological systems, people behind the users, the person that is the researcher, and our (presumed) willful ignorance of that complexity. The chapter concludes with a call for research that recognizes and better addresses the need to see and understand these complexities in all research with digitally mediated components. The dissertation closes with a reflection on where to go from here, stepping forward with this research into continued exploration of digital complexity and how it affects gender, masculinities, and men's rights groups.

Framing the Research

The purpose of this research was to explore the discourses of masculinity in two different sub-groups of the manosphere, to compare them, and gain insight into how those discourses influence community ideology. Using masculinities theories, it sought to provide more depth in discussions of how and why communities of men with varying levels of anti-feminist and anti-women sentiment gain social traction and influence while at loggerheads with discourses of equity. I wanted to explore communities where even as I was appalled by their rhetoric and ideology, I felt a strange connection – like I could be one of them. Examining the /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill sub-communities of the website reddit.com this research engages the following research questions:

> What discourses of masculinity are embedded in the reddit manosphere spaces of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, how do they compare, and how are these discourses disseminated and monitored to maintain collective group ideologies?

> and

> What role might reddit play, through /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, in connecting manosphere communities, and pushing users toward more radical viewpoints about gender and power?

As I worked through the challenging tasks of data generation, collection, and analysis, I learned that research with online communities, and especially the type of ethnographic research I chose to do, was a complicated undertaking. The reading I had done on digital ethnographic practices had prepared me for many of these challenges, but from my difficulties a third, important question emerged:

> What indicators or guideposts would have been useful as a novice digital qualitative researcher to help me better plan, develop, conduct, and theorise my digital ethnographic research?

Important note

Usernames, as well as spelling and grammar in direct quotations, used throughout the manuscript are verbatim from reddit. Misspellings, word confusion, grammatical errors, etc., are not marked with [*sic*] as there are too many. I will also acknowledge the tensions inherent in using verbatim quotes and usernames from my data in this dissertation. The ethical and practical implications of the decision to include verbatim texts and names is discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

reddit: the front page of the internet

- (Text that appears as the search title when you search for reddit online)

Dive Into Anything - Reddit is home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection. Whether you're into breaking news, sports, TV fan theories, or a never-ending stream of the internet's cutest animals, there's a community on reddit for you.

- (redditinc, 2021, emphasis in original)

Reddit bridges communities and individuals with ideas, the latest digital trends, and breaking news (...okay, and maybe cats)"

- (reddit.com, 2016)

What is reddit?

Reddit.com is a website, a content aggregator, business, and platform for user interaction that has become a hub in the North American cultural zeitgeist and an influencer in global economic markets.[11] Adrienne Massanari (2015) describes reddit by saying "It's kind of like a community, message board, carnival, and play space rolled into one. Oh, and yeah – you should know there's some really disturbing stuff too. It's kind of like the best and worst parts of the internet and humanity rolled up into one space" (p. 19). In her book *We are the Nerds* Christine Lagorio-Chafkin (2018) describes it as "a Petri dish for discussion and proliferation of the most interesting, funny, and awful parts of the Internet" (p. x). Reddit has changed a lot since Massanari's words in 2015, but her description is no less salient or accurate today even with the rise of reddit as a global internet giant. As of January 2020[12], reddit boasted over 52 million daily active users, over 100 thousand active sub-communities, and over 50 billion monthly views (Reddit Inc., 2021). In March 2021, Amazon[13] ranked reddit 19th in global internet traffic and engagement over the past 90 days (7th in the United States), with over 163,000 total sites linking in, and over 50 percent of users coming from the US, the United Kingdom, and India (Alexa Internet Inc., 2021). Even with this massive popularity, reddit remains a carnival, performance, a play space, communities, and a platform, and I would add reddit as a haven, and part of a pipeline. I will more clearly articulate why I would add these descriptors throughout this larger document (see especially chapter 4 (*A Positive Identity for Men?*)), but reddit provides a haven for marginalized groups (and racists) to come together. Reddit can also move users through a pipeline to better health or community assistance (Morris, 2011),[14] or make angry people even angrier (Cousineau, 2021a).

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[11] The influence of reddit has sprung up on multiple occasions since the website was founded, including having a very significant part in the #gamergate controversy (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2017), and most recently played a role in upsetting Wall Street capitalism and caused congressional hearings on the state of the financial sector (Duffy, 2021; M. Phillips, 2021).

[12] This is the last date of official number released by reddit and posted on the site.

[13] Reddit uses Amazon Web Services so it is likely this data is fairly accurate – at least for the purposes of Amazon selling add space on the site.

[14] In this example from 2011, reddit rallied around a three-year-old boy with a rare blood disease, and raised over $30,000 in less than 12 hours toward getting the boy the treatment he needed.

Reddit was designed in 2004 by two undergraduate students at the University of Virginia, Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian,[15] to bring together content they were searching out across a variety of websites (Massanari, 2015). The vision for the website's design was to aggregate content across sources by linking out to the original websites, much in the way that the front page of a newspaper gives small samples of content found elsewhere in paper (Lagorio-Chafkin, 2018; Ohanian, 2016). While this original premise remains, what reddit provides to users has changed since it was developed. Alongside discussion forums for every post, reddit provides video and image hosting, user-to-user chat, live streaming through the *Reddit Public Access Network*, direct messaging, advertisement sales, an in-website currency and awards system, and a host of bots users and communities can use to automate various aspects of user interactions.

Reddit is also a private corporation, a fact that is important especially if discussing questions of ethics or decision-making from reddit administration (Carlson & Cousineau, 2020). Reddit is currently an independent subsidiary of Advance Publications, and recently increased its valuation to $6 billion (doubled from the $3 billion in February 2019) after a successful round of $250 million in funding led by Vy Capital (Needleman, 2021). As a private company beholden to investors, we must consider reddit's decision-making in light of revenue-driven motivations. So, while discussions about free speech and personal liberties are part of the discourse about reddit (and other social sites like Twitter (Carlson, 2021; Gillespie, 2018)), they are not government entities, or utilities, and they (mostly) make their own rules about content policies, user protections, and what is allowed on their site.

Reddit isn't a social networking site and might not be social media. We need to talk about what reddit is before we can talk about how reddit works. Is reddit a social network? Is it social media? Is it something else entirely? These questions matter because depending on the ways that we choose to engage with reddit as a research space (for example, examining discourse as I have done in this dissertation), how we view and define reddit can have tangible effects on the way we do research.

It is easy enough to lump reddit in with social networking sites (like Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) because they share several Web 2.0 attributes (like user-generated content) that make them

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[15] These names are the official names on the website, and the most often referenced as the founders of reddit. There are, however, some arguments that say this list should include Aaron Swartz, and Christopher Slowe who joined the team not long after the company was founded.

feel similar. However, Massanari (2015) makes a compelling argument for a distinction between reddit and social networking sites, in particular that social networking sites have a reliance on profiles and the personal "status update" as important features, and this is lacking from reddit.[16] Six years on from Massanari's work, *social media* has risen as a blanket term used in academia and popular media to describe many socially-connected apps. Rather than the more rigidly defined *social networking*, and there is a tendency to describe reddit using this terminology instead (e.g., N. Fox et al., 2021; Moyer et al., 2015). I contend that neither of these definitions is entirely correct.

Social Media is a term often used, but rather poorly defined in most contexts. This is because it is primarily defined by what it is not (traditional mainstream media environments where the individual simply consumes content), rather than by trying to parse out the complicated and convoluted nature of the concept. For example, neither of the studies cited at the end of the previous paragraph bother to define social media, even as they give a startlingly wide array of sites as examples from reddit, to Twitter, Flickr, and Wikipedia. When thinking about the term social media, I prefer the framework synthesized by Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011), that proposed seven building blocks which come together to formulate a social media: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. The building blocks are presented as a kind of honeycomb structure that can exist individually or in combination, and that together create the social media landscape. Kietzmann et al.'s building block structure is from the field of business strategy and meant to help businesses understand social media and determine how to leverage it for profit. It also provides a way to see the difference between what Massanari calls social networking sites, and social media more broadly. Considering reddit through Kietzmann et al.'s framework, it is reasonable to consider reddit as social media.

However, around the same time as the publication of Massanari's book (2015), Jonathan Obar and Steve Wildman edited a special issue of *Telecommunications Policy* dedicated to the governance challenges of social media. In the introduction to that special issue, they defined social media using a set of four commonalities: social media services are (currently) Web 2.0

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[16] I would perhaps add "was" here because reddit is slowly moving toward a more user-identified structure, including the use of customisable avatars and the ability to add more content to the user page, on top of the already tracked elements of Karma and awards, etc.

Internet-based applications; user-generated content is the lifeblood; individuals and groups create user-specific profiles for a site or app designed and maintained by a social media service; and social media services facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting profiles between individuals and/or groups. Here we have a definition where reddit does not meet two of the four criteria, since users do not really create a profile in the way they describe in the introduction to the special issue (see footnote from the beginning of this section discussing reddit's current move toward a more user-identified structure), and profiles are not connected in a peer-to-peer way.[17] By Obar and Wildman's definition, reddit is not social media.

Why how we categorize reddit matters for research. While the discussion of reddit's status as a social networking or social media site might seem pedantic, how we categorise reddit has an impact on the way we understand and analyse its content. The above definitions were chosen to illustrate the differences in the ways that scholars have theorised online social landscapes as ways to categorise them. Developed by scholars in business and telecommunications policy, they serve particular purposes for those fields, but are helpful in trying to pin down how we might understand reddit to frame studies of the platform.

If we see reddit as social media, and our focus is on discourses within that space, then we may tend to overlook the intricacies and particularities of its digitally mediated context in favour of the texts generated by users. Since the focus of social media is peer-to-peer interaction (Obar & Wildman, 2015), there is a tendency to treat those interactions in the same ways we might peer-to-peer interactions in analogue contexts (Asterhan & Bouton, 2017). In these cases, discussions of the digitally mediated context and its influences on the participants or the outcomes of the research, are given little or no attention beyond an acknowledgement that the research occurred online (for one example see Lizzo & Liechty, 2020). This primacy given to user-generated texts allows us to put aside the underlying elements that influence the user experience on social media/networks (and sites like reddit). These hidden elements often go unacknowledged until users and/or researchers are able to identify them and their effects. Some examples include the overcoding of gender on software products and platforms and how these gender codes can be challenged (Bivens, 2017; A. R. Stone, 1995), hidden and overt racism coded into platforms and web design (Bliuc et al., 2018; Daniels, 2009b; Lauckner et al., 2019),

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[17] This may also be changing with the ability to follow users directly appearing on reddit.

as well as data orientalism and colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2020; Kotliar, 2020). By pushing these aside, we allow the texts to be representative of the individual and group contexts/feelings, and do not account for the other important influences on users and data.

Seeing the text as isolated and representative also tends to ignore how the mechanisms that allow for online groups to form and flourish – meaning the sorting algorithms that direct users to specific content, or what search results are displayed and in what order – impact who is exposed to the group and who has the opportunity to join (Noble, 2018a, 2018b). For example, Safiya Noble in the introduction to her book *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018b) describes an experience in 2010 where her search for "black girls" yielded HotBlackPussy.com as the first result, and while the same Google search in August of 2021 yields very different results (figure 2-1), the same search on reddit in 2021 gives results similar to Noble's experience in 2010 (figure 2-2).
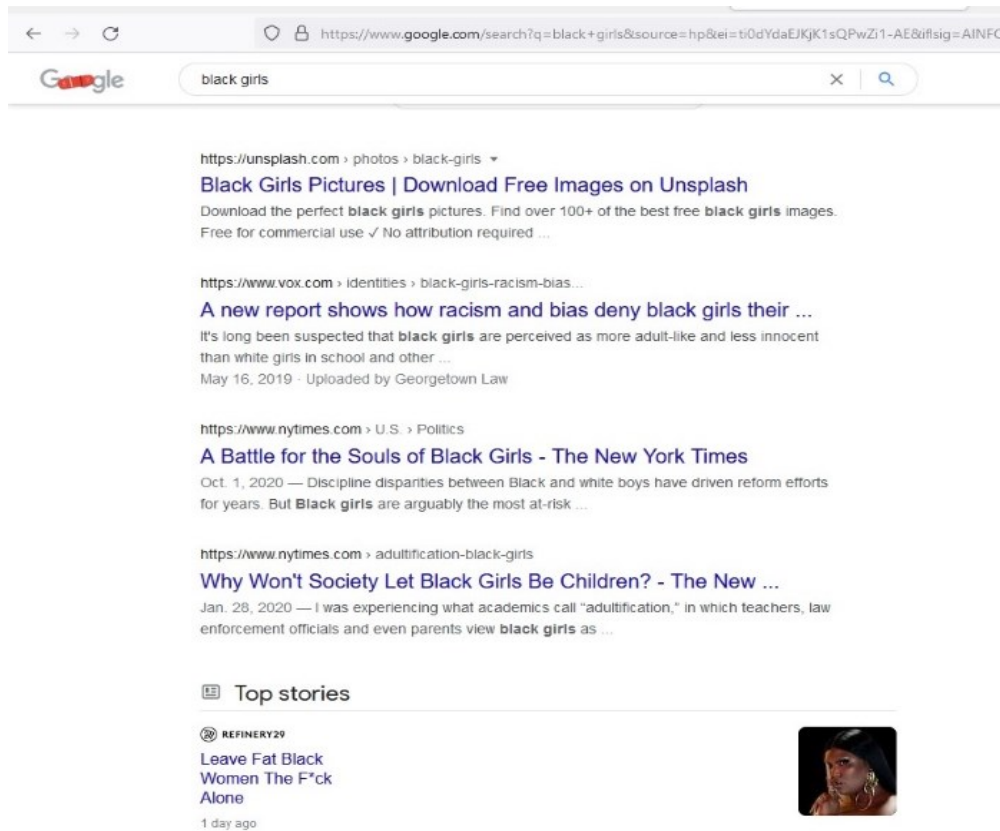
Figure 2-1: Screenshot of search results from Google.com for the term "black girls" - August 18, 2021
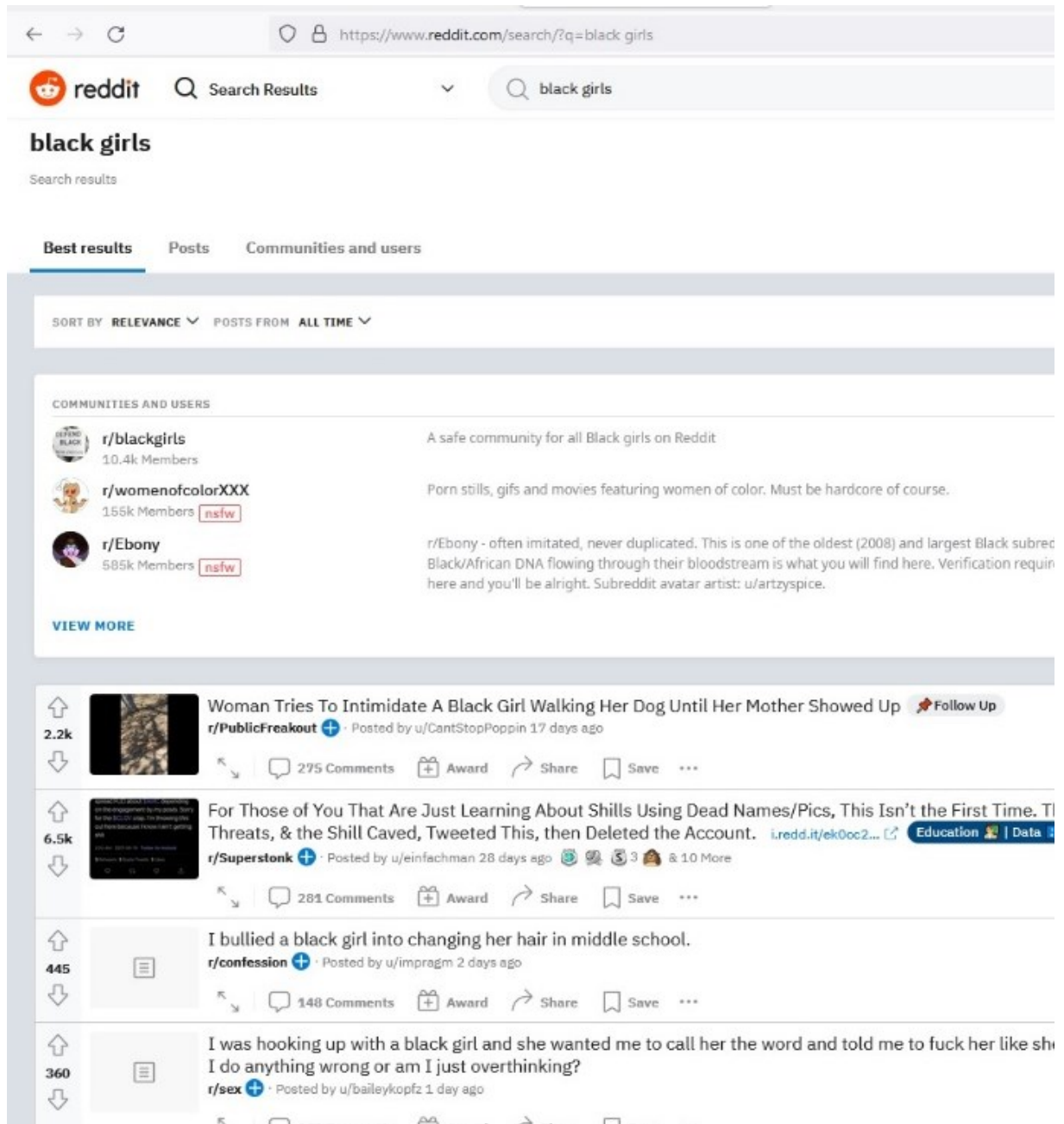
Figure 2-2: Screenshot of search for the term "black girls" on reddit - August 18, 2021

My point is that while it is tempting to classify reddit as a social media or social network (something I have done in my own writing (Cousineau, 2021c)), doing so gives permission to some researchers to focus exclusively on the *social,* through texts produced by users and with little contextual information. This approach disintegrates the technological and techno-social influences from the data that we collect and analyse. That is a troublesome oversimplification. Disconnecting the technological and techno-social from textual data artifacts ignores the elements (beyond the social environment) that Stone (1995) finds so compelling about

cyberspace, including the "prosthetic communication[s …] emblematic of the current state of complex interaction between humans and machines," and "the identities that emerge from these interactions—fragmented, complex, diffracted through the lenses of technology, culture, and new techno-cultural formations" (p. 36). At best, using this kind of broad and ineffectual definition (simply calling something social media and not exploring the implications of such any further) allows us to move to discourse without too much hassle. Doing so, we can produce research findings that speak to thematic content of communities in broad and introductory ways, and these works are needed as foundations for deeper exploration of social context. But at worst, it has the potential to render the work of research on social platforms to be dangerously ignorant of significant factors that drive and direct user content and experience online, elements of great significance in exploring social worlds.

The takeaway from this discussion should not be to come down on one side or the other about whether reddit is a social network or social media (although you can if you like); the answer to that question does not matter to me. Rather, my aim is to make sure that as we think about reddit (and other platforms that we lump into "social technologies") we consider it in the context of technologically-influenced peer-to-peer interaction. While reddit is peer-to-peer, it is so much more. The complex technological processes that allow it to function – the "fragmented, complex, [and] diffracted" interactions that occur between users, technologies and users, and between technologies – shape the social and textual data that we scoop up and subject to analysis. This means that the discussions and social contexts that we discover and analyse on reddit are specific and contingent, as with any social context, and have layers of hidden influence through the technological, social, and techno-social. Reddit's broad user base and potential for social influence make these considerations significant as a study site and a cultural hub.[18]

How Reddit Works
The bulk of reddit content is generated through discussions between users; the asynchronous conversations they engage in around the text, picture, video, and link posts that start threads on the site. Almost anyone can be a reddit user. All you need to sign up is an email address and a unique username, which can be anything from a random object (e.g. /u/NeonBookFlags), to an action (e.g. /u/LearnStuffAboutStuff),[19] or a random string of characters typed out on the

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[18] With deference to the fact that it is a cultural hub for a certain demographic of user at a certain time and place.
[19] These are two of the alt-accounts I have used in research and over time on reddit.

keyboard.[20] Once active, users are presented with a list of 27 categories, each containing between 10 and 25 community descriptions. These communities are called subreddits and vary widely. Figure 2-3 displays the new user subreddit sign-up interface that is presented when a new user account is opened. This composite image displays the categories that are provided for the user, as well as all the subreddits that are displayed in the "Just for You" category; most of these subreddits are general interest and very popular on the site. Users are encouraged to sign up for subreddits that interest them, to create a unique-to-the-user homepage experience of aggregated content.

Figure 2-3: Composite image of subreddit options presented to new users after they sign up. All categories available are presented on the left side of the image, and all subreddits from the "Just for You" category are presented on the right.

[20] For example, the username /u/asdfghjk was taken by someone over 12 years ago, but the username /u/7y8u9i0o was not as of this writing.

While the subreddits presented to new users are broad in scope, the system recommends communities that are "safe for work," including communities about music, fashion, sports, tech, and travel, and the very active subreddits that provide not safe for work (NSFW) content (like pornography, charged political discussion, violence, gore, etc.) do not appear in the initial signup selection of interests. By presenting the new user introduction to the site in this way, reddit constructs a certain kind of narrative around what it represents as a company to new users and those seeking information about the site, and can keep the more problematic elements of reddit sub-communities behind the curtain until the user is initiated to the interface and content access.

Subreddits

Subreddits are the most important feature of reddit. While not an original part of reddit's design, subreddits were introduced in 2006 to help manage the increase in users and content being posted to the site. As reddit grew, the founders sought to separate NFSW (Not Safe For Work – i.e. pornographic, violent, racist) content from other content on the site (Lagorio-Chafkin, 2018). Huffman and Ohanian made this move to give the site more structure and to make finding specific kinds of content less difficult for users. Subreddits were originally managed by the reddit team, and users wishing to start a new subreddit required approval from the reddit administrators, but with the growth of the user base and ever-increasing requests for subreddits, the process was turned over to users. This meant an explosion of user-created subreddit communities, with over 2.7 million subreddits, and growing by over 1500 per day as of March 15, 2021 (Front Page Metrics, 2021).[21] The huge number of sub-communities means that users can find almost any content they have interest in on the site, allowing for people with niche interests to come together (as do many other places on the internet), but also allows for those communities to divide and sub-divide like a fractal with increasing specialization. The implications of this related to men's groups is discussed later in this chapter.

After the initial new user set-up, users can subscribe to other individual subreddits and those are added to their curated homepage feed. For example, I created a new user account (/u/LearnStuffAboutStuff/),[22] and populated my subscription list with subreddits dealing with

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[21] Not all sub-communities are active or populated, and the number of 2.7 million is the total number created.
[22] Here the /u/ is the designation for a particular user on reddit and can be queried to see the post history and Karma score of any given user.

Men's Rights Activism (MRA) and related content.[23] Due to this approach, /u/LearnStuffAboutStuff's front page is populated exclusively by content from these subreddits, creating a content experience that talks a lot about men's experience, and really hates feminism (figure 2-4).
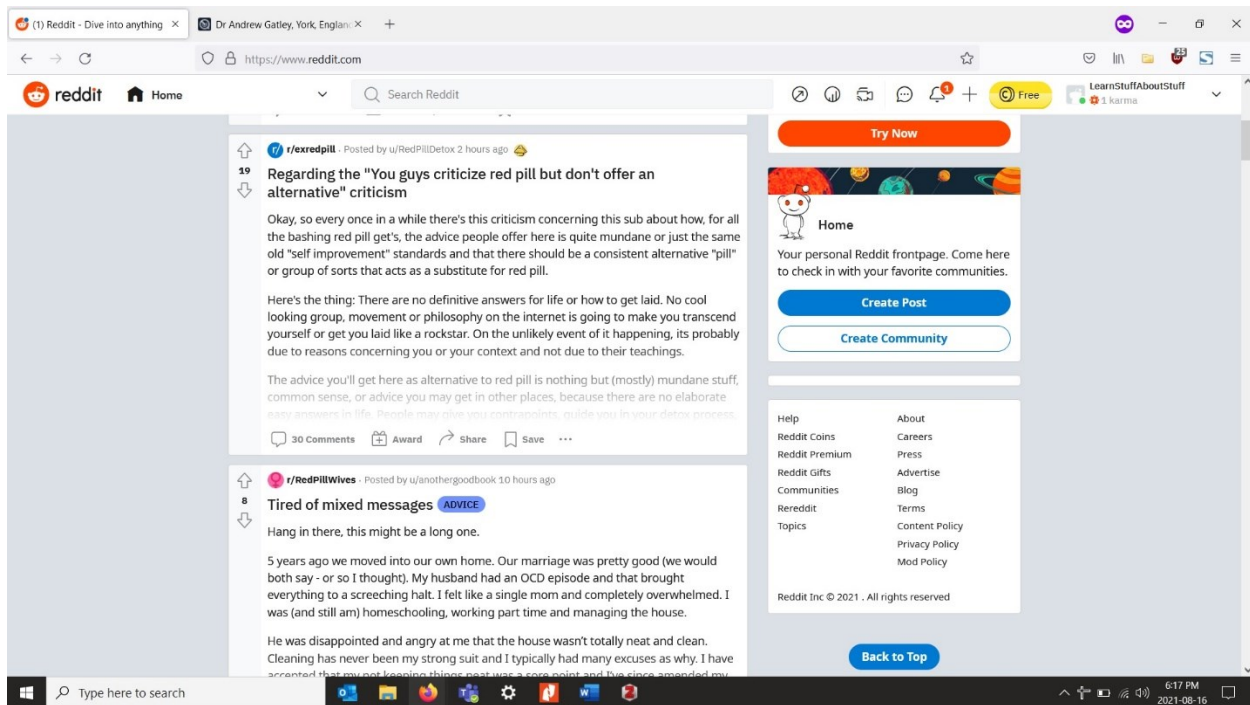
Figure 2-4: Reddit landing page for /u/LearnStuffAboutStuff - August 16, 2021.

Non-users may also explore reddit, but without the individualised frontpage experience. Visitors default to the home page which aggregates the most popular content across most subreddits (some subreddits with adult content or other content reddit has deemed problematic are excluded from the aggregation algorithm of the home page), and visitors are not able to vote on posts or add comments (figure 2-5).

When a user's account becomes active, they can begin to post, comment, vote on posts and comments, and access quarantined subreddits.[24] While some reddit communities limit these options in various ways (for example some communities limit voting to positive votes,[25] and

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[23] Subreddit subscriptions included: /r/againstmensrights, /r/asktrp, /r/exredpill, /r/marriedredpill, /r/MensRights, /r/MensRightsMeta, /r/MGTOW, /r/redpillbooks, /r/RedPillReadingGroup, /r/RedPillWives, /r/RedPillWomen, /r/RedPillWorkplace, /r/TheBluePill, /r/TheRedPill

[24] The feature requiring users to be logged in and have a verified email address with reddit was added in early 2021, and was not a present or limiting factor for my systematic data collection or ethics approval.

[25] These limits can be circumvented by some third-party apps that give access to reddit and provide some reddit users a way to work around this type of limit introduced by moderators.

some communities limit who can post on the subreddit to approved individuals), each subreddit has these features. Posts are the main content points of reddit and consist of text-only posts, images, video, links to media content (like YouTube videos), and links to outside sources (like news sites or other media). Once posted, that content is open for comment from other reddit users. These comments are limited to text and links[26] and although they are generated from the original post content, they can diverge wildly from the original subject. Comments are arranged in an asynchronous, bulletin-board system (BBS) style where comments have a parent-child relationship, and nest one within the other to create a (sometimes) very long, and (sometimes) very complicated visual experience
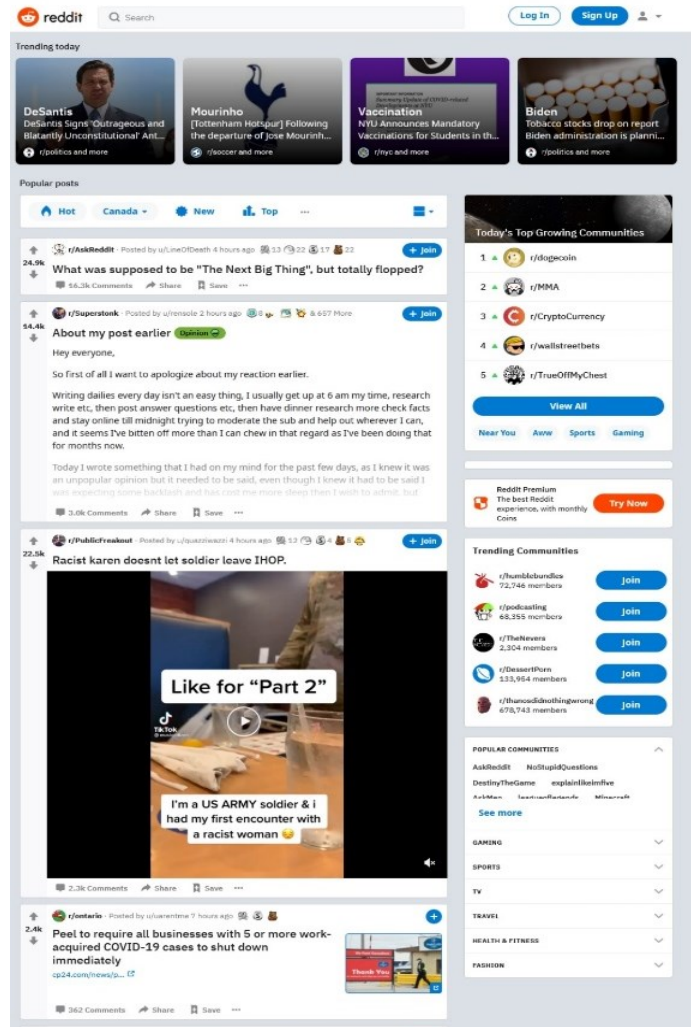
Figure 2-5: Reddit landing page for non-users – April 19, 2021.

(figure 2-6). This arrangement helps the user understand where comments reference, but can also lose the user in the flow of conversation and the complicated relationships between parent and multi-order child comments. This complexity sometimes creates parallel discussions within post threads, where sub-threads have formed at different times discussing the same things, because it is too much work to make sure that discussion has not already taken place. For example, the 1st order child comment in figure 2-6 (directly under the blue arrow) reflects the poster's view about how 'modern' young people have lost the ability to have 'authentic human interaction' in the form of sustained and engaged person-to-person contact. The sub-comments (second through seventh order child comments) are a discussion on this idea. Not included in this image is an

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[26] In late 2021 users began to be able to post gifs as comments in reddit, but this is limited to select subreddit, and only premium users.

interaction between other users further down in the thread about how "the IRL conversation skills of the average person (let's include many guys too) are appallingly low. People aren't just bored, they are boring (as fuck)". These conversations occurred only 3 hours apart, but are independent, demonstrating that for some users it is too laborious to read each parent comment and sub-thread to avoid replicated discussions.
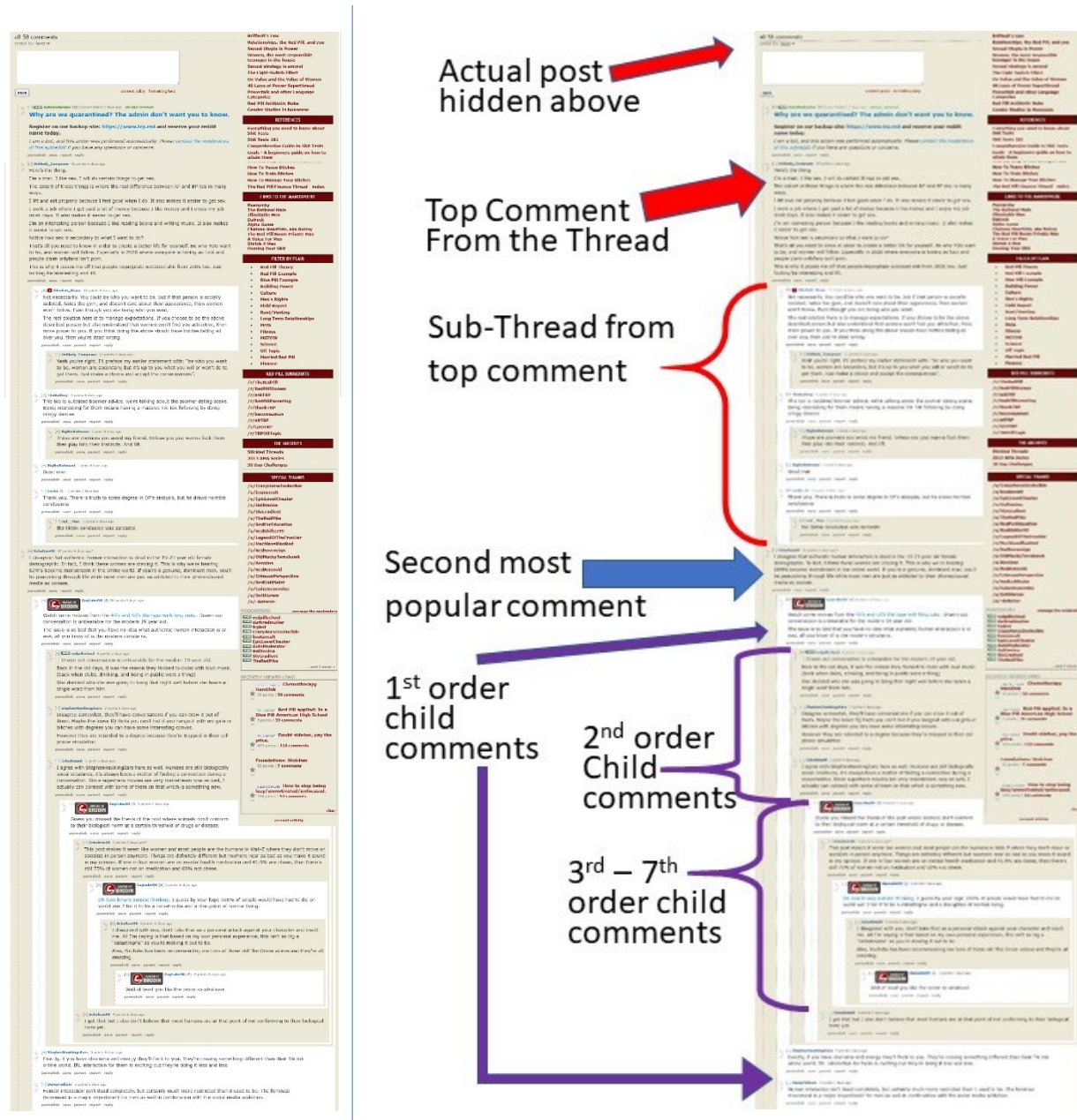
Figure 2-6: Organization of reddit comment threads, clean and with descriptions (note: this figure uses the older version of the reddit graphical user interface because the colours used to separate comment levels make the comments easier to visualize for this example).

Users can also vote on posts and comments throughout reddit, with each post and comment accompanied by up arrows (orange when clicked) and down arrows (blue when clicked) (figure 2-7). The orange upvote arrow has become deeply embedded in reddit culture, generating memes used throughout the site and beyond (figure 2-8).

Figure 2-7: Image showing no vote, upvote (orange), and downvote (blue) of the same post.

Figure 2-8: "Shut up and Take my Upvote" meme using image from television show Futurama - © quickmeme.com

The voting system is a logarithmically weighted positive and negative attribution measure which accumulates over time for individual posts, and for individual users in the form of imaginary internet points called "Karma." Users with the highest amount of Karma have accumulated many millions of points (figure 2-9). These votes, along with the post submission

time, and the frequency and ratio of upvotes to downvotes, have an impact on how close to the top of a users' feed posts appear (Monroe, 2009; Salihefendic, 2015). The sorting process is similar for comments, although submission time plays a significantly less important role in this sorting mechanism given that "in a comment system you want to rank the best comments highest regardless of their submission time" (Salihefendic, 2015, How Reddit's comment ranking works).
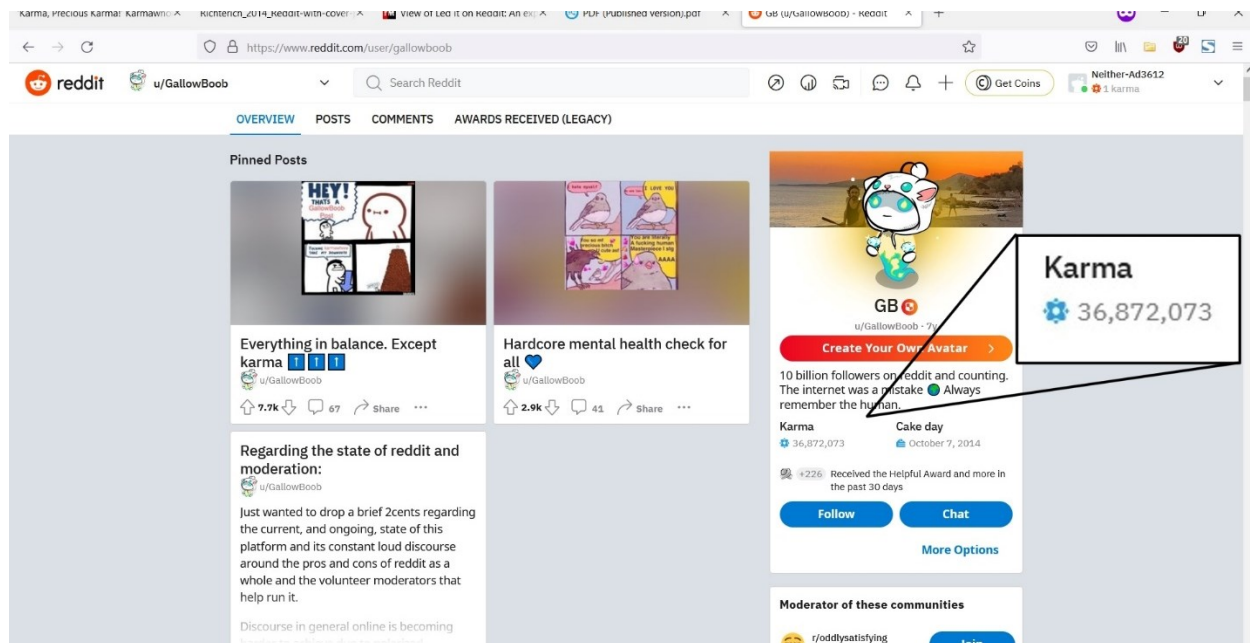
Figure 2-9: User page for /u/GallowBoob showing 36,872,073 Karma - August 18, 2021

Karma is derived from the votes users receive on posts and comments they make on reddit, and is what van der Nagel (2013) calls "the form in which peer approval is manifested on the site" (Karma points section, para. 1). Karma is not a currency and cannot be used to purchase things, but serves as a kind of social credit score on the site, impacting a user's reputation and displayed on their profile. Some reddit scholars like Kilgo et al. (2016) and Bergstrom (2011), have theorised that Karma scores indicate if "a user is an active and productive participant on the site" (Kilgo et al., 2016, The semi-anonymous world of Reddit, para. 5), but this discounts the large number of users whose participation is limited to voting and reading rather than posting. As a social credit score, Karma is used by some subreddits to limit who is allowed to post to help limit trolling of the communities, meaning that users require a certain amount of Karma and time on site to post.

Why Reddit Works

> ## Anonymity
>
> Anonymity, or perceived anonymity, is an important contributor to the development of personal identity, as well as contribution to community identity, in online spaces. It makes permissible the expression of identities perhaps limited by social or geographical limitations (e.g., gender expression or sexual orientation), and the possibility of contentious contribution to social discourse (Douglas, 2016; Suler, 2004). Identity and content are policed online through rules and codes of conduct that bend, flex, and change depending on the time and location, and through the actions of other users – the same way we develop and monitor adherents to social codes in any other form of interaction. This has been the case since very early networked communities (Kendall, 1998), although for early Internet users "anonymity was accepted as a norm … [and] these factors combined to facilitate experimentation with gender and other aspects of identity" (Tufekci, 2014, pp. 14–15).
>
> Codes of conduct are established on individual online platforms, and how identity is conceptualized online is an important part of what is allowed and disallowed. Like offline groups, the online spaces that we inhabit serve as community spaces (Baym, 2010), and the communities, insists Baym, are important to our sustained sense of self. Our participation in them contributes directly to our personal sense of identity; networked publics and counterpublics (boyd, 2011; Renninger, 2015). What complicates discussions about linked identity and personal identity online is that these communities, like reddit, can consist of quasi-anonymous actors; individuals who are known only by their username and the information they choose to share. Phillips (2002) discussed how anonymity online created dividing lines between the digital and offline personas of users. Anonymity has also been shown to promote socially contentious ideology and lashing out (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). The nature of internet identity and anonymity is such that it permits behaviour which would be heavily policed, or completely unacceptable offline, including acts of hate speech (Carlson, 2021), and hypothetical violence that can have real and significant consequences by influencing acts of real violence – self-inflicted (Penney, 2016), or inflicted on others (Lumsden, 2019).
>
> Taking up the concept of disinhibited hate speech, Shepherd, Harvey, Jordan, Srauy, and Miltner (2015), explored the history and likely future of hate speech online. In doing so they identify an important phenomenon in the context of anonymous internet spaces and the desire to be heard, that "one must be heard before one can speak" (p. 3). This statement presents the idea that for anyone to be listened to online, particularly in aggregated spaces like reddit, they must first be known, something that is established through the creation of persistent identification; like usernames and Karma scores on

reddit. The idea of being known in an otherwise quasi-anonymous space like reddit creates a complicated interaction between anonymity and visibility, identity and behaviour. Authors like Tufekci (2014) have shown that far from creating free spaces for identity experimentation and 'unacceptable behaviour' completely separated from the fleshy body,

> The tighter coupling of online and off-line identities through the embedding of profiles in existing social networks, digitally enabled peer-to-peer and hierarchical surveillance, triangulation of abundant information, the ability to examine persistent records of social imprints, and the erosion of practical obscurity – the notion that not everything that was public was easy to find, and hence it was protected through obscurity – have all combined to make the Internet productive of clashes between different social roles—a source of great stress for users, because everyone inhabits multiple social roles. (pp. 16-17)

Many users, and particularly moderators in men's rights spaces on reddit, are certainly interested in being heard by other users, and the nature/content of their posts, as well as their histories, allow the development of credible online personas within these particular ideological spaces. They are persistent and follow users when they move to self-hosted platforms or other media spaces (Schofield, 2021; Tiffany, 2020). The echo chamber of their readership bias, combined with the permissive nature of masculinist commentary online, allows reddit users and moderators to engage actively with sexual, sexist, and anti-feminist material, and be rewarded for it.

Tufekci (2014) and other scholars (e.g., N. Fox et al., 2021; Gaudette et al., 2020), have discussed how even though identities on sites like reddit have a measure of quasi-anonymity and separation from users' 'fleshy' lives, anonymity on reddit as in any digital landscape is relative and contingent. To access the site, the user must have internet access, be logged in using a physical piece of hardware with its own identifiers, and move through a complex network or hardware and software interchanges that necessarily track them. Reddit can see when users are logged in, when they post, entire post histories (including deleted posts), and likely the IP address of the user. All internet traffic in the United States is subject to investigation by US authorities. While some of these elements can be obfuscated, it is highly impractical, if not impossible, to avoid all of them, meaning that should the authorities (or anyone else with access to the digital footprint) wish to locate a user, they can likely do so. Another layer to the contingent anonymity of reddit are the detective skills of other users. The user network of distributed knowledge has a reputation for investigative work about people, especially potential scams (Needham, 2018), and can uncover information about even the most careful active users. Anonymity on reddit, even the quasi anonymity recognised to exist on the site, is contingent and fleeting. It relies mostly on being one of many.

The fact that anyone can sign up for reddit at any time affords a level of anonymity to use of the site and allows users some freedom to express opinions with minimal consequences. How much or how little a user reveals about themselves is up to them. /u/LearnStuffAboutStuff has virtually no reddit presence, and if you go to that user page, you will see one Karma point and a reddit birthday (Cake day) in October of 2017 (Figure 2-10). There is no information available about me as an observing user. I can maintain this level of anonymity provided I do not interact on the site beyond reading posts. But, it is interaction which draws many users to reddit (Massanari, 2015).
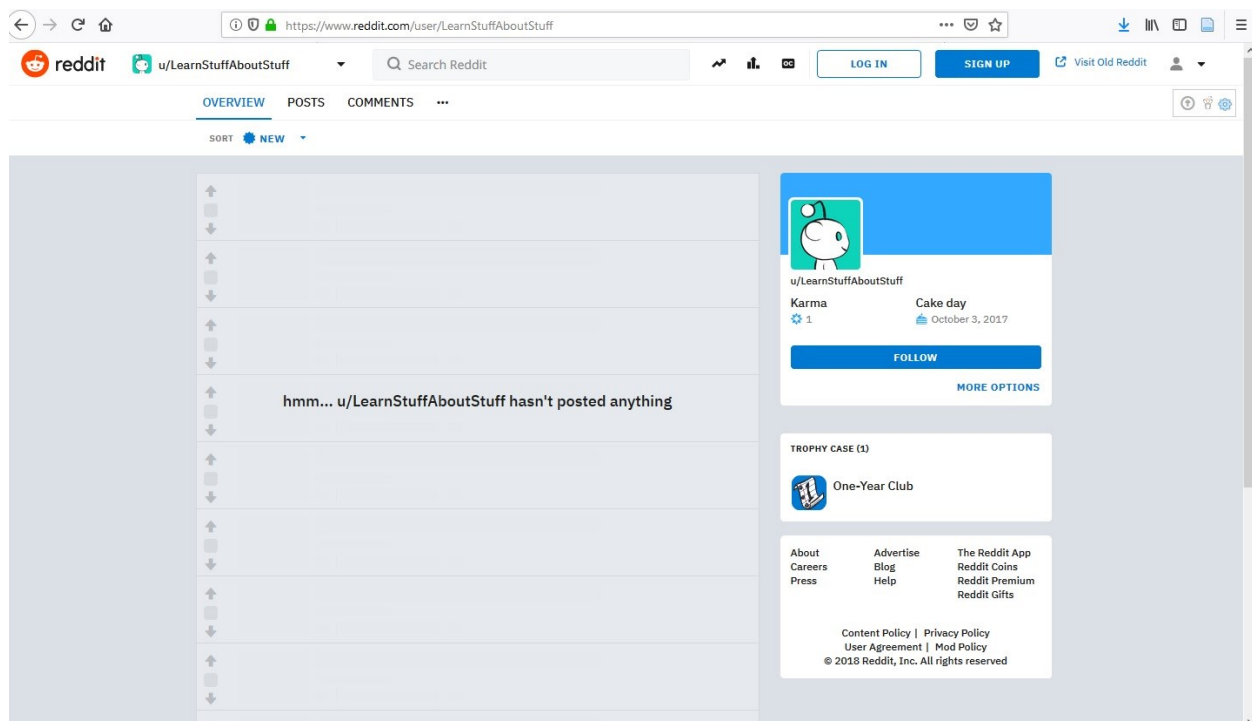
Figure 2-10: Reddit user page for user /u/LearnStuffAboutStuff.

As a user begins to vote and comment on posts, the information available on their user page grows, and analysis of their posts and votes can yield a lot of information about them. In some cases, users of reddit may choose to be open about their non-reddit identity, identifying themselves readily or taking photos of themselves to prove their identities. This is often the case with celebrity reddit users, who choose to identify themselves openly on their own accounts to avoid others impersonating them on the site (see: /u/GovSchwarzenegger/ or /u/thisisbillgates/) (figure 2-11). The interplay of anonymity and visibility on reddit complicates discussion about the motivations for posting disturbing content or commenting negatively on posts or pictures.

Users become more vulnerable to doxing (Douglas, 2016) [27] the more they interact with the site, and the interaction between the development of persistent and rewarded (with Karma and reddit awards) identities and the potential for exposure of 'regular lives' outside of reddit has been an area of inquiry for some time, especially as it relates to users who engage in making pornography (van der Nagel, 2013). The dangers of doxing, although they apply to any users of a platform like reddit, are particularly focused on women, and women (and especially women from vulnerable groups) are "more likely to have their private information posted online and receive greater amounts of unwanted, vitriolic messages" (Eckert & Metzger-Riftkin, 2020, p. 1). In particular, women are more likely to be subject to the kinds of coordinated online harassment that accompany doxing, like brigading (a kind of cyber-mobbing that involves coordinated attacks on personal communication and social media to overwhelm the subject (Lenhart et al., 2016)), and sexualised forms of harassment that include revenge porn, leaked nudes, and falsified/manufactured documents/photos/internet posts (Vogels, 2021).
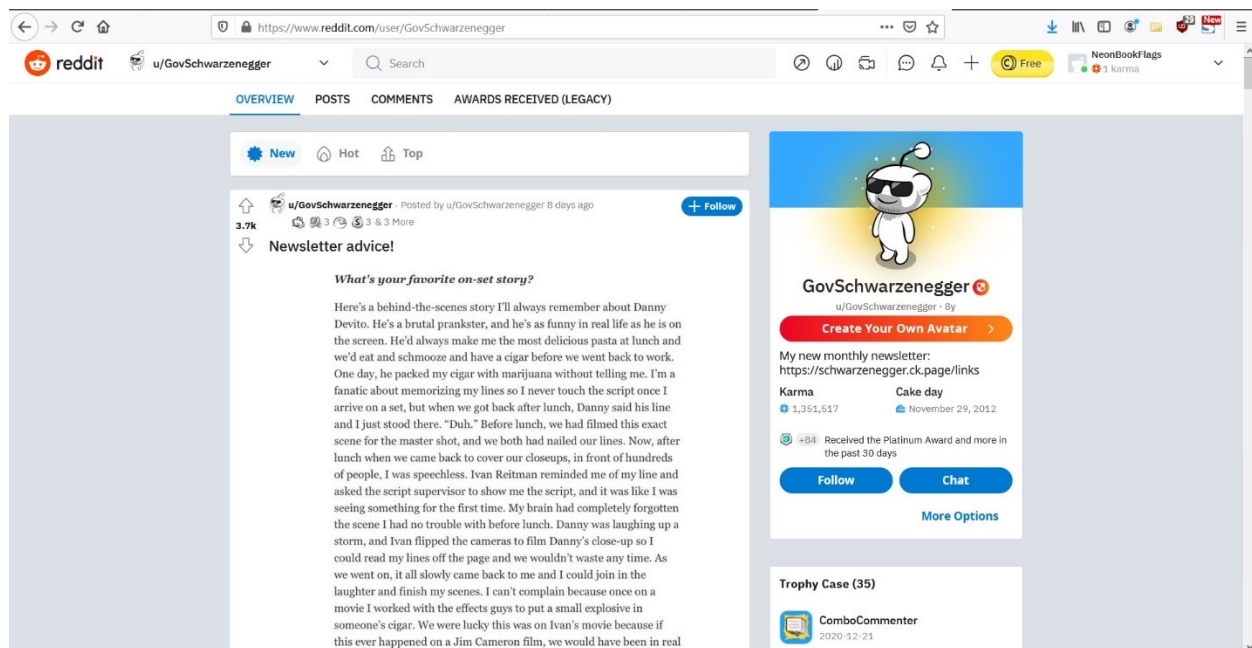
Figure 2-11: User page for user /u/GovSchwarzenegger. Arnold Schwarzenegger's reddit username.

Reddit users with high status (Karma and social credit) within the community also become influential voices in a variety of ways, for better or for worse. For example, the reddit

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[27] Doxing is the intentional public release onto the Internet of personal information about an individual by a third party, often with the intent to humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish the identified individual (Douglas, 2016, p. 199).

user /u/unidan, who became the go-to for many science questions across a number of subreddits, was suspended from reddit when it was discovered that he had used a variety of accounts and processes to upvote his own posts and remove negative comments through voting manipulation (Jacobs, 2017). Prior to being suspended, /u/unidan held a tremendous amount of sway with reddit users seeking information about ecology and was frequently requested by name to contribute to conversations based on his high level of participation and Karma score (the website karmalb.com reports that /u/unidan had 2,481,837 Karma in July 2014 prior to his suspension).

The Wild(?) West

Although there are some consistent rules concerning posts across the site (e.g., no child pornography), the reddit admin (and particularly founder and current CEO Steve Huffman) have been staunch supporters of "free speech" and did very little to control content prior to 2015. The first decade of reddit included the rise of popular subreddits like /r/jailbait (suggestive pictures of underage girls), /r/beatingwomen, and /r/watchpeopledie, the last of these having almost 315,000 subscribers when it was banned. In 2015, then CEO Ellen Pao initiated major overhauls to the way that reddit moderated content (Pao, 2017), in a bid to help reddit appeal to a wider audience and better follow their mission to "help people discover places where they can be their true selves, and empower our community to flourish" (Reddit.com, 2016). Pao's moves to better monitor content, as well as revise the default subreddits for users at the time, were met with significant pushback from users and inside the company itself (Pao, 2017).

The dual position that reddit was trying to strike at that time, as "advocates" for free speech but also building safe communities for all, left them reluctant to remove or sensor content posted to the site, although moderators were (and remain) free to do so within subreddits (Marwick, 2017). The position of advocating for free speech provided myriad benefits to reddit, including all but eliminating the need for expensive and difficult to implement content moderation, not having to take a position on the need for the platform to protect users, and allowing them to continue hosting profitable content regardless of the political and possible legal ramifications of hosting that content (Langvardt, 2018; Marwick, 2017; Pao, 2017; S. T. Roberts, 2019).

The landscape of moderation and content governance has changed significantly on the site since Ellen Pao's tenure as CEO, and major updates to the harassment policy on the site in 2015, 2019, 2020, and another significant update following the insurrection in the United States

in January of 2021, have banned revenge porn, clandestine pornographic images, many instances of hate speech and harassment, and has limited far-right, fascist, racist, and supremacist content.

Reddit uses two main measures to police subreddits: banning and quarantine. Bans are complete removals of subreddits and their contents from the site, and there are numerous high-profile subreddits that have been banned over the last several years including, but not limited to: /r/incels, /r/braincels, /r/upskirts, /r/whitenationalism, /r/watchblackpeopledie, /r/the_donald, /r/gendercritical, and many others. Quarantine is a more complicated means of policing subreddits, and involves limiting the exposure of the subreddit (through excluding them from site-wide aggregation and from appearing in searches), but allowing them to operate otherwise unimpeded. Quarantine poses some interesting ethical questions that I explore in my work with Caitlin Ring Carlson (Carlson & Cousineau, 2020).

The Men's Rights Reddit-Sphere

As I explained in the subreddits section earlier in this chapter, there are communities for almost any viewpoint or ideology on reddit. Although it is unsurprising, the existence of a long list of subreddit communities focused on men's 'rights' and anti-feminist rhetoric is both interesting and troubling. [28] These groups create "parallel discursive arenas where members of [self-perceived] subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Manosphere communities on reddit aggregate collective political messages that articulate critiques of feminism and Western cultural developments attributed to feminism. While they show a discontinuity in how they interpret the outcomes of feminist cultural development, they are equally implicated in the backlash that puts even modest feminist gains under fire (Dragiewicz, 2011; Dragiewicz & Mann, 2016). Both /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are important groups in the manosphere part of reddit, and the remainder of this section will briefly describe these communities to close out my explanation of reddit.

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[28] These include, but are not limited to: /r/asktrp, /r/marriedredpill, /r/MensRights, /r/MensRightsMeta, /r/MGTOW, /r/redpillbooks, /r/RedPillReadingGroup, /r/RedPillWives, /r/RedPillWomen, /r/RedPillWorkplace, /r/TheRedPill, banned subreddits like /r/incels and /r/braincels, and a variety of others.

/r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill subreddits

/r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are two of the largest men's group subreddits on the site with a combined subscriber base of over 500,000 users.[29] Although different in focus and discussion points, these two sub-communities have anti-feminism and frequent discussion about men's place in Western society in common. /r/MensRights presents as a space where discussion, supporting studies, and links are welcomed in building - "a place for those who wish to discuss men's rights and the ways said rights are infringed upon" (*/r/MensRights*, 2019). Just over 10 years old as a community, posts generally highlight ways in which the community members see men as disadvantaged. /r/TheRedPill presents itself as a place for "discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men" (*/r/TheRedPill*, 2019). Discussions on TheRedPill are more focused on heterosexual conquest, coupled with the desire to return to "traditional" gender roles and norms.

/r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill provide good case studies for exploration of the spread of men's rights content as afforded by reddit. These subreddits were chosen for study because they represent two different communities within the manosphere and different ways of approaching gender and male power. They share deeply anti-feminist values, but discuss and act on them in very different ways (DeCook, 2019). /r/TheRedPill, for example, regularly has posts about the differences between Alpha (correct performance of manhood to work towards and achieve) and Beta (incorrect performance of manhood to be avoided) men as a way of critiquing issues with the social order (/u/GayLubeOil, 2019). /r/MensRights is more likely to have posts about current events, using them to highlight their perceptions of inequalities in the ways that men and women are treated in society (/u/Hibernia86, 2019). While not the least or most extreme examples of manosphere thinking, they reveal contrast in the ways that different subgroups approach gender-linked social issues, but share core values. They also demonstrate how reddit allows groups to be driven by different kinds of content while espousing similar values.

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[29] This is an estimate based on the over 305,000 /r/MensRights users as of June 24, 2021, and the 251,000 users of /r/TheRedPill in the last-known user count in March of 2018 when they were quarantined.
Also, it is important to note that there is no way to determine how many of these users are active at any given time, or have been active over the past day, week, month, or year, so the number of active users is almost certainly lower. Although this data is likely available to reddit administrators at some level, it is not available to researchers or the public. For context, the most popular subreddits in October of 2021 (/r/Music, /r/aww, /r/gaming, /r/AskReddit, and /r/funny) had between 28 million and 37.5 million subscribers).

/r/MensRights
www.reddit.com/r/MensRights
Created Mar 19, 2008
314,881 subscribed members as of October 4, 2021

The /r/MensRights subreddit is dominated by discussions of the misandry participants perceive in their lives. Misandry, as the members of this group use it, can be understood as a kind of antithesis to misogyny – a hatred or contempt for men and boys. Based on post content, the users are mostly from Western democracies (USA, Canada, Australia, Western Europe)[30], and they craft narratives around specific issues to build a semi-coherent chronicle of the oppression of men. The larger themes within this narrative include statistically higher numbers of men who are homeless or underhoused, murdered, incarcerated, die at work, or die by suicide. They discuss issues of binary gender disparity between men and women in custody court proceedings; spousal support proceedings; allegations, convictions, and relative severity of punishment for perpetrators in sexual assault and misconduct allegations; and the male-only selective service provisions in countries like the United States. Posts and discussion most often begin with content from major news sources, national and local statistics, secondary news sources, or social media that the user believes highlights one (or more) of the subreddit's core issues (e.g., men losing custody of children). They often include a catchy title and brief commentary from the original poster intended to promote discussion and/or frame the content as a men's rights issue in a particular way. Comments from users are generally agreeable, conversation is generally civil when there are disagreements, and users are supportive of others who have been negatively affected by the issue highlighted in the posts (e.g., users who feel disaffected with the child custody court system). Almost all threads in the subreddit begin with or come back to being critical of feminism, and what they view as "misandrist" public and judicial policy.

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[30] There is a small but notable presence of users in this community from India and Pakistan, and although there are some women who participate in this subreddit community (known only because they self-declare as women in their comments, most users appear to be men.

/r/TheRedPill
www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill
Created Oct 25, 2012
Quarantined September 2018
292,612 subscribed members as of September 2018[31]

/r/TheRedPill is dedicated to "Discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men" (/r/TheRedPill, 2019). What this tag line comes to mean is that the community aims to help men (re)produce a specific type of masculinity, and that leveraging that articulation of masculinity will allow men to be dominant in their (hetero)sexual relationships. Exercising that sexual strategy and dominance will lead to sexual and general life satisfaction. The name of the forum is a reference to the Wachowski sisters'[32] film *The Matrix* (1999), where the protagonist (Neo) has revealed to them that the world they know is an elaborate simulation disguising the fact that humans have been enslaved by autonomous machines. Neo is given the choice between taking the blue pill and resuming their life in the simulation, or the red pill to wake up and fight against the simulation on behalf of all humanity (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). Co-opting the language and ideas of the film, /r/TheRedPill's more accurate purpose in using the red pill metaphor is to "expose the "true nature" of feminism as oppressive to men and to help men reclaim their "rightful place" in society" (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019, p. 595).

Posts in /r/TheRedPill are largely divided between story telling about sexual experience or lack thereof, and the theoretical underpinning of their sexual and relationship ethos. Men are divided into successful (Alpha) and unsuccessful (other – including Beta, etc.) groups, and sexual strategy is discussed at length. Dominance and manipulation are paramount to the approach espoused by these men, and their understanding of male-female relationships is imbricated with ideologies of male supremacy. Discussion within the forum can be both supportive and castigating, and while the tone is civil overall, users who challenge the red pill canon are quickly downvoted or banned.

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[31] After being quarantined, subscriber numbers for quarantined subreddits are no longer displayed. Using the workaround old.reddit.com to see the previous user interface, a subscriber number is shown, but these numbers are suspect. For example, it showed 1.7 million subscribed members for /r/TheRedPill on March 1, 2020. This number is highly misleading as it would indicate a more than four-fold increase in users in the 18 months after the community was severely limited with sanctions. The reason for the spurious subscriber numbers is unknown.
[32] I take a great deal of pleasure in the irony created by the deep investment of /r/TheRedPill in the red pill idea in relation to feminism and the required liberation of men given its deep investment in traditional and 'alpha' masculinity when both directors of the Matrix trilogy have since come out as trans women (Stack, 2016).

Why Choose Reddit as a Study Site?

The men's rights movement and the Red Pill are active on numerous online platforms. The Red Pill has an active blogging community, mailing lists, many YouTube and other video content producing elements, as well as their own set of websites and thread and forum-based web spaces (e.g., redpilltheory.com, trp.red). The men's rights movement has deep web roots through organizations like A Voice for Men (avoiceformen.com), and the National Coalition for Men (ncfm.org) that both have online histories dating back to the mid-1990s. Men's rights groups also have a well-developed blog and social media presence, including YouTube and other online content producers, regular bloggers, and a long-standing publishing wing that focuses on publishing text written by men's rights advocates. With all these possible avenues of inquiry into the rhetorics and discourses of masculinity in these groups, the question of why I chose to study them on reddit is a reasonable one.

Alongside its function as a content aggregator reddit is a discursive space, as the combination of posting, voting, and commenting encourages both positive and negative commentary (Couldry, 2003; Massanari, 2015). What makes the site a compelling location for research is not simply the posting of content, the commenting, the quasi-anonymity, or even the voting (these are all available on other sites), but the ways these elements are combined. The combination of socialization, competition, discussion, and the ability to voice thoughts all in one place makes reddit compelling.

The primary reason I chose reddit is that at the beginning of this project in 2017, I was a long time reddit user who was beginning to see reddit more often in the news, and the site was beginning to exert some larger influence in the cultural zeitgeist. Because of its position as up-and-coming, the scholarly attention that had been paid to the site was mostly introductory, exploring the platform and establishing it as culturally significant (Buntain & Golbeck, 2014; Massanari, 2013, 2015; Ovadia, 2015). I saw an opportunity to contribute exploration and analysis of men and masculinities as they used the site for men's rights activism. At the time, explorations of men and masculinities were continuing to expand, and with the upswing in far-right rhetoric, male supremacist action, and regressive politics that accompanied the Trump presidency, groups that supported these ideologies were reporting increased membership. Reddit was (and is) a place where these ideological groups can recruit and expand their numbers, and the combination of the technological particularities of reddit (like its quasi-anonymity (Van der

Nagel & Frith, 2015)) or its programmed ability to foster collective identity (Gaudette et al., 2020)), the low-risk socialisation that takes place on the site (Duguay, 2021), and the young men's nerd culture that started and propelled the website to cultural significance (Pao, 2017), make it a logical place to explore masculinities and the manosphere.

Beyond the open, community driven content on reddit, the systems of risk and reward at play on the site are important. While risk to individuals based on what they post or comments seems relatively low given the quasi-anonymity of the username and sign-up systems, there is certainly some recognition within the community that physical identities are not safe even as they are disconnected from reddit personas.[33] As explored in the anonymity sidebar, the creation and use of throwaway accounts is pervasive on the site, and has become such standard fare that users often start posts from a throwaway account with variations of "throwaway, for obvious reasons." The interplay between the safety of quasi-anonymity and increased or decreased anonymity through throwaways (or the act of verifying that is meant to prove the user identity through sharing photos of the user that include identifying information) adds layers to the consideration about the significance of user participation in reddit activities, and particularly participation in manosphere communities where the consequences for known participation are not likely to be as severe as known participation in overtly racist groups.

Conversely, the reward system that accumulates Karma for the user with no discernable use beyond the dopamine hits users get from receiving them (Sherman et al., 2016), is interesting in its own right. Clearly a huge draw for many users (see the /u/unidan story from the Why Reddit Works section), the Karma system creates a kind of (potentially)[34] quasi-anonymous notoriety; an identification that is at once identifiable but also (potentially) separate from the physical identity. This risk/reward interplay, especially when the content that users post has the potential to affect them outside of reddit has implications for what is shared, and why, in manosphere communities on reddit.

The volume of content available on (and through) reddit, as well as the ease of links between communities and with outside sources is a significant factor in selecting reddit as a

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[33] Many scholars, like Stone (1995) would argue that the idea of separation between the online and physical personas is illusory at best.
[34] This qualification is included because some users, as described earlier using Arnold Schwarzenegger, connect their physical and reddit personas purposefully.

study space. While it is possible to navigate between individual community spaces online and collect data like what one might collect on reddit,[35] the cohesive and connected experiences that occur on reddit are unique. The way that the system coordinates and collates information presents it to the user in a way that highlights for them (unless they change the default sort mode) to show them what is the "most important," "most talked about," and "most interesting" content from their areas of interest. These sorting mechanisms, as well as the combinations of information and posts presented to individual users, makes reddit an important place for research about the manosphere as a loose set of groups that rely on these kinds of weak ties to hold them together.

But why these subs?

One might rightly ask why I chose these two specific men's subreddits over others. At the time when I started this project, several men's subreddits that were part of the manosphere were still active on reddit. For some examples, /r/MGTOW (Men Going their Own Way) was active until early 2020 and would have provided a male separatist angle for the research, and /r/incels was active until late 2017. The motivation for selecting /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill at that time was multi-faceted. These two subreddits were (and continue to be) the most active and populated manosphere subreddits on reddit (for contrast /r/MGTOW had 147,406 subscribers when it was banned in January of 2020, and /r/incels had only 42,236 when it was banned). I assumed that their (relatively) high user numbers make them more likely to provide varied and nuanced research data. They also both focus on men as part of social systems as opposed to, for example, the male separatism of MGTOW, or aggrieved exclusion of incels. It also seemed, through my initial explorations of content in the groups, that they discussed men and men's issues differently, and that these differences might prove significant in understanding their individual and social influence. There was also little research on either of these reddit communities at the time, and although some has been published while I was completing my study, they remain under-researched communities of influence.

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[35] There is good work on the men's rights movement in this vein by authors like Dragiewicz (2011) and Hodapp (2017).

Positioning the Men's Rights Movement

It is impossible to examine the discourses of men's rights and male supremacist groups on reddit without understanding the current men's rights movement more broadly, and situating it theoretically and historically. The following section explores the roots and current realities of the men's rights movement, then positions me as a person and researcher relative to the men who participate in these groups and their rhetorics.

Feminist Roots

The men's rights movement has roots which are deeply interconnected with contemporary feminisms in North America (Messner, 2016). With the rise of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, an associated movement of pro-feminist men began to explore and expound a men's liberation movement. Leveraging concepts of gender roles and gender symmetry, men's liberationists argued that men were also repressed and oppressed by the gendered structures which had come to form the boundaries of acceptable action in society (Messner, 1998). These early groups did not emerge in response to or in opposition to feminism, but as a part of the feminist movement, and with the intention of using feminist ideological development to benefit men alongside women. They sought to do this by bringing about what Messner characterises as "progressive personal and social change" (Messner, 2016, p. 8). The men who led this ideological development identified at that time that rigid 'sex roles' ascribed to both men and women serve to oppress those who are subject to them and used these ideas to attract men to feminist thinking. In doing so, they acknowledged that men were privileged by the social and sex roles ascribed to them, but were "simultaneously dehumanized" (Pleck, 2004) by them.

The difficult task of both acknowledging privilege, while arguing as an oppressed group, divided the men's liberation movement and created what we can (too simply) describe as pro-feminist (e.g. pro-feminist magazines like *Changing Men*) and anti-feminist factions (e.g. The National Coalition for Men – formerly The National Coalition of Free Men (*National Coalition For Men (NCFM)*, 2019)). The anti-feminist faction turned to the oppressive nature of sex roles and co-opted the language of liberal feminists to refocus the critique of symmetrical sex-role oppression on men.[36] This allowed for theorisation about men and male privilege and the

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[36] In addition to the evolution of the aforementioned National Coalition for Men, see the evolution of the writing of Warren Farrell (Farrell, 1975, 1996, 2005, 2012).

declaration that male privilege was a myth in Herb Goldberg's (1976) *The Hazards of Being Male*. It also fueled assertions beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s (and continuing today) that the true victims of sexual harassment, false rape accusations, prostitution, dating rituals, pornography, divorce settlements, sexist media conventions, and domestic violence, were men (Baumli, 1985; Messner, 1998, 2016). Perhaps unironically, these arguments (augmented with contemporary discussion of economic (in)equity) remain the main talking points of the men's rights movement today.

The impacts of new realities

As the United States, Canada, and some other Western democracies have moved toward more neoliberal economic and social policies (Brodie, 2008), the disappearance of a breadwinner class provided new insecurities for young working class men (Connell, 2005). These economic changes, driven by late capitalism, also generated new ideological leverage points for the men's rights movement. The personal insecurities wrought by changing structures came (and continue) on the heels of increased visibility of change brought by the feminist movement, including Title IX and other equity measures like #MeToo, the Pussy Hat Project, and sections 15 and 28 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Brake, 2007; Government of Canada, 2017; Kane, 1996). At the same time, as the internet began to take hold in the daily lives of individuals, feminist expressions which had been largely segregated within zine communities and cultural sub-communities, were able to reach a broader audience more quickly through publishing online and sharing through social media outlets (Nguyen, 2013). So, as social and economic realities were changing for populations of Western democracies, especially in North America, some men wondered what might become of them and their role in families (Crompton, 1999; Pateman, 2006), and grieved what they saw as a lost entitlement (Manne, 2020). With these perceived attacks on manhood, coupled with consistent reminders of feminist progress on issues of pervasive inequity (e.g. Title IX, #MeToo, etc.), it makes sense that the number of men interested in groups that both critique and push back against social change might increase; and they did (Bates, 2020; Grabowska & Rawłuszko, 2020). Particularly on reddit, men's rights communities have seen steady growth[37] since the beginning of 2016, with noticeable bumps in

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[37] Although subscriber numbers have seen steady increases, it is actually impossible to tell (outside of user activity statistics that are presumably available to reddit staff, but not researchers) how many of these users are reading, voting on, and engaging with the content.

subscription numbers to both /r/TheRedPill and /r/MensRights at the beginning of 2018 – just after the initial spike of interest and exposure for the #MeToo movement.

The critiques pointed at feminist thinking from these sub-communities and posts often fail to recognize the complex nature of masculinity; both the intra-masculine hierarchies and hegemonic discourses, as well as the ever-moving inter-social ideal of the hegemonic male (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018). Simultaneously, comments and critiques most often levied by these communities fail to recognize the extensive feminist theory that has addressed the unfair socio-cultural norms of masculinity. These unfair cultural norms occur under neoliberalism (Cornwall, 2016; Lindisfarne & Neale, 2016), with the simultaneous subordination and privilege of men (Dowd, 2010), or have effects on men and women (Butler, 1990; J. Rubin, 2016). But asking who are the men that join these groups? Why do they join? and Who do they blame for the issues they see in our social worlds? are important questions. There are legitimate reasons why men gravitate to these groups, and these reasons are worthy of exploration and discussion. What role does the location of our interactions, and our ability to curate our media and thought exposure, have on what we believe about gender, power, sex, and influence? As a man who has read the content, blog posts, and discussion and chosen to push back against men's rights as they are presented in spaces like /r/TheRedPill, should I really feel enlightened?

3 : Theoretical Perspective

A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing—a focus upon object A involves a neglect of object B.

- Kenneth Burke (1954/2018, p. 70)

My positionality is on display throughout this dissertation. Through my stories and writing you will learn that I am a White man in my thirties, married with a young child. My shoulders are broad, and I have always been heavy, but at 50 pounds lighter than I was at 20 I am no longer fat. I am not tall, but not short enough to be self-conscious about it (I am the tallest in my family by far). I am bald(ing), but I wear a thick and full beard, and despite my ongoing insecurities about body image and baldness I am generally confident and do my best to project that confidence when I travel, present my work, and meet new people. Sometimes I talk too much. Sometimes I am pre-judged by these elements of physicality and projected confidence, among other things, especially in feminist-oriented spaces.[38] During the writing of this dissertation, I am speeding toward the end of a long journey with an uncertain outcome after completion. I see job advertisements that prefer applicants of colour and/or members of oppressed groups as preferred candidates, even when I feel my work is a good fit. Job applications are accompanied by surveys about identity and self-identification meant to establish whether I am a White man or not. I own a home that I purchased on my own before I met my partner, and that I would share equally with her if we divorced. My past is privileged, and my future feels uncertain – I seem like a perfect target for recruitment into the men's rights movement. Unseen though, are the years of feminist study I have undertaken, the books I have read, the feminist parents I have, and my commitment to social justice. Unseen is my own understanding that acknowledging oppression and working for justice only disadvantage me insofar as they threaten a privilege that is unearned and undeserved. Unseen are the reams of feminist and masculinities theory that inform my scholarship and the way I see the complexities of the world. This chapter will delve into the feminist and masculinities theories I use to situate the gender, power, and control elements of my dissertation research. It will discuss the internet and digitally mediated spaces as essential to understanding reddit, the social setting it creates, and how users come together online. It will also begin to explore how gender theory, digitality, and sociality come together as parts of an ever-

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[38] As a cis-het White man entering these spaces, I think that skepticism is warranted. If I were entering these spaces to assail them (I am not) I would not be the first to do so, and so this caution about my intentions is valid.

changing connection. One cannot be parsed out from the others without changing everything, just as the site dynamics, interactions, and interface of a website like reddit are all integral to the experience of users and cannot be parsed from that experience (Kilgo et al., 2016; Singer et al., 2014).

This levelling of significance between the human and non-human complicates theoretical perspective, as it troubles the humanist notion of technology as the tool of the human and human experience. Understanding this is important because even as we engage with questions about online involvement, culture, and the push/pull factors which drive participants to men's 'rights' spaces, we cannot escape the necessary influence and change made to lives and experiences of those individuals by the platforms and devices they use to interact and engage with one another.

What follows is the theoretical groundwork and supporting literature that guides my ethnographic exploration of two men's spaces on reddit. It will begin with feminist theory, and a particular focus on technofeminism, which informs the nature of this inquiry on gender, power structures, sex/gender systems, and critical evaluation. It will examine how the critical studies of masculinities inform the examination and understanding of masculinities discourses from the manosphere. It will speak to technology studies, deeply imbricated with technofeminist theory, including the role of digitally mediated communication, modes of technological engagement, the internet, online communities, and the interconnections and interrelations of technology and the body.

Feminist Thinking

Feminism, positioned as the analysis and critique of sex/gender systems (G. Rubin, 2009), situates the researcher and the social spaces they examine in relief against the backdrops of traditionalism, power, and control. In complement to, but also because of this relief, feminism cannot act as a singularity, but must reflect the positionality of the researcher and their role in the sex/gender systems they inhabit. We find, then, the broadly defined theoretical space of feminism subdivided, with each sub-group populated by individual feminists practicing personal and identifiable feminisms; "there are as many feminisms as there are feminists" (Parry, Johnson, & Wagler, 2018, p. 2). This diversity allows room for those who, like me, might not be the first to be identified as feminist thinkers, and a diversity of thought and approach to feminist praxis. Feminist theory allows me the tools to explore and analyse the complex sex/gender

systems which affect me and the people around me every day. Feminist theory has also allowed me to see and better understand the interactions of power, privilege, and entitlement which control our socio-political landscapes, and has given me the language to understand and express intersectional and multimodal power relationships.

To explore the breadth of feminist theory is a task beyond this document, and one undertaken by a variety of feminist thinkers previously (see: Collins, 2002; Freedman, 2007; hooks, 2000, 2014; LeGates, 2012; Lorber, 2012; K.-Y. Taylor, 2017, among others), but explorations of significant feminist theoretical perspectives for the purposes of this research are necessary to best situate my work. Exploring social construction feminism, intersectional feminism, and the theoretical perspective provided by technofeminism, this section will provide the lensing that guides this research.

Social Construction Feminism

Social construction feminism focuses on the idea that gender is built, maintained, and propagated by inter- and intra-personal pressures which serve to influence individual performance in various ways (Rouse, 1996). Lorber (2012) places social construction feminism within the context of gender rebellion feminisms as it calls into question any pre-existing notion that there are natural or pre-determined forms of male or female gender expression linked to biological sex. Although biological sex is not called into question *per se*, what is called into question are the embodiments of sex spaces/roles/expectations.

Social construction feminism maintains that gender is both a process and a structure (Lorber, 2012). As "a society-wide institution" (p. 208), the structures of gender are pervasive in family, religion, work, government, medicine, and many other places. Gender's ordering potential can determine privilege, distribution of power, and resources. Within these structures, gendering itself is a process by which individuals are consistently assigned, or assign to themselves, attributes of binary gender identity. The gender binary is organized hierarchically (male over and above female), and this hierarchy extends to gendered structures. There are also hierarchies of performance within male and female (e.g., hierarchies of masculinities).[39] Where individuals do not conform to these gender processes (by being non-binary for example), they

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[39] For more reading on the way that hierarchies of masculine performance are developed and actualized in society see the excellent work of masculinities authors (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; R. Dunlap & Johnson, 2013; Messerschmidt, 2018; Pascoe, 2010).

are marginalized. Gender structures both regulate and prescribe gendered performance, and limit self-expression, personal freedom, and access to power in significant ways. Social construction feminism critiques these structures and processes as limiting and exclusionary.

Gender as structure

Clothes for a Toddler

Have you ever bought clothes for a toddler? I have a toddler, so I have had the distinct pleasure that it is to buy tiny clothes for a tiny human being. They are cute, and when our child was a baby, it was easy enough to buy clothes with soft colours in whites, greens, yellows, and greys. They came with non-gendered, cute animals. It didn't last. Because our child has a penis, he is interpolated as a boy and associated with things a boy 'should' like. His clothes have trucks and dinosaurs, bright colours in strong shades, monsters and motorbikes. He is always rewarded for his adventurous nature and "running real fast," and less often for his caring for others and his need to clean up dirt on the floor. I am conscious of these ideas and messages, but I feel almost powerless to limit their influence while he attends daycare and gets gifts from loving grandparents. Already, at not yet 2 years old, he is set to become as the sex/gender system (and capitalism) needs him to be – to consume boy clothes, and boy toys, and boy ways of being. He loves to play with his Little People baby care set, feeding a putting his baby to bed – things I love to do with him. But, I can't get him a "lovingly caring for baby like my Dad" shirt.

What does it mean for gender to serve as a structure? Martin (2004) called gender a "social institution," using the demonstrated qualities of endurance, power, and elements of identity across a range of people and places, to show the pervasive nature of its influence. With gender understood as a cultural institution, says Martin, both performing gender and becoming gendered are not exclusively personal, but are enshrined in the cultural processes we are subject to. The ways we interpret, perform, and are assigned gender become factors in how we are allowed to perform socially. I do not want to gender my child through clothing, but without a reasonable amount of wealth, the time, and energy to force the issue, I am subjected to capitalist pressure (highly gendered clothes are everywhere and are less expensive), and the decisions of those who think less critically than I about issues like this (through hand-me-downs).

I catch myself almost daily making sure that I reinforce caring behaviour alongside speed, and that even at under two we are learning what it looks like when others are upset and how we can show empathy. I am caught in these structures as well (as is my partner), and there are expectations about who has expertise and agency over decisions in our home and the life of our child – daycare almost never calls me first. Gendered expectations like these were explored

by Barbara Risman (2004) in her arguments that gender is in and of itself a social structure, as well as being a significant contributor to how we organize other social structures. "This situates gender," says Risman, "at the same level of significance as the economy and the polity" (p. 446) in its influence on our behaviour and social stratification.

The binary and prescriptive structure of gender intertwines with other power structures and means of social stratification to form complex hierarchies. Elements like economic class, ability, and race weave together with gender in processes of intersectional subordination and oppression (Collins, 1998, 2019; Crenshaw, 1990) Risman (2004), echoing Crenshaw's (1990) work on intersectionality, suggests that to better understand the influences and cross-influences of these expectations on individuals and the structures, we must follow a both/and strategy, as analysis of a single structure without acknowledgement of the other, intersecting structures, is incomplete and incapable of providing a basis for change.

Gender as a process

The process of gendering is incremental and ongoing. Although there are significant moments of gendering, as in the medical interpolation in the declaration of gender along with sex at birth - *"It's a Boy!"* (Butler, 2006), generally our appointment of gender is more subtle. Martin (1998) noted how the gendered cultural expectations of comportment, and physicality, are imprinted on young children as they entered pre-school. Through a "hidden curriculum" of gender policing, teachers imparted a set of standards, which changed the children's behaviour in distinct ways over time. Martin observed that children entered their preschool classrooms with similar ways of being and moving, regardless of gender identity, and that teachers and workers actively regulated them, causing fundamental changes in ways girls and boys acted and moved in physical space.

This regulation imposed by the teachers in Martin's (1998) work are not singular actions, but are instead incorporated into a variety of expectations and performances which create a process of gendering. Small actions and corrections, like those of teachers for preschoolers, or erroneous uses of the term "sir" in Betsy Lucal's (1999) experience, impose incremental and subtle expectations of gender, building over time. This process of gendering is not only imposed upon us, but we are also complicit in our own gendering. This dual influence was evident in Garfinkel's (1967) work where the gender of Agnes (Garfinkel's research subject) was continually produced by Agnes' own actions of female gender performance, but also by Garfinkel's enacted masculinity and "chivalry" when they were together (Rogers, 1992).

Garfinkel's unconscious acts of "maleness" implicate him in the construction of both his own and Agnes' gender identities. Cecilia Ridgeway (2011) describes how these pre-ordained ways of seeing others serve a type of frame which simultaneously sets boundaries around the ways which others can appear, and limit our own ability to see different ways of being. The approach, then, of social construction feminism has been to document and educate about the ways that gendered structures and processes affect the individual, and larger society, with much of the work beginning in academic circles and filtering out to activist spaces.

This is where we see a significant critique of social construction feminism. Because gendering is pervasive in our social ordering, changing gendered behaviour at the individual level does not necessarily change gendered organizations or structures (Lorber, 2012). Although there is some hope in a building up over time of these influences, work must be done at the individual and social levels at the same time (Risman, 2004). Although there has been some success in law and policy, we continue to organize and order through gender, maintaining the gendered portion of Ridgeway's (2011) frames. Also, where gender is acknowledged as the primary mechanism of ordering, it can risk overshadowing other important ways of social ordering like poverty, racial identity, disability, or sexuality. Seeing only through gender, then, can suffer from common critiques of feminisms, where the notion of the sisterhood of women is considered at the expense of the diversity expressed by women, and ignores the intersectional natures of oppression and subjugation experienced by many (Collins, 2019). Discussions within social construction feminism can therefore feel remarkably White, and centered on the gendered experiences of "women," even while simultaneously beginning a discussion about how the individualized experiences within that category inform and influence the embodiment of gender.

Social construction feminism and reddit
Gender as a social construction is essential when thinking about reddit's manosphere groups, as their ideological foundations are tied to understandings of gender and sex/gender systems. For them, gender is a social system like Martin's (2004) social institution, and is expressly structural in delimiting proper action and inaction focused expressly on gender identity. It is also tied (in both /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill) to categories of biological sex, conflating these things and arguing against equality and/or equity based on those beliefs. Users in both communities lean quite heavily on gender as proper ordering for men and women, and see the structural conditions of gendered segregationist practice as rooted in nature rather than social power. The result of

these presuppositions is that the socially constructed origins of men's and women's spaces, men's versus women's work, or men's versus women's tendencies are nature not nurture, and serve as justification for all manner of subjugation and subordination. These arguments appear regularly, and the following quote provides a typical example.

Questioning "equality", the feminist sacred cow

Why do feminists assume "equality" is a good/natural thing?!
I challenge the basic assumption that equality in itself is a good goal. Has this even been proven to be the natural state?!
Aren't the female of the species in some animals bigger than the male, and vice versa? Some are hunters while the opposite sex isn't.
So the basic assumption that human males should have the same role as human females still needs to be proven.

For example, why do you automatically assume that the number of women in STEM fields should naturally be the same as men's?! Why assume that its lower number is because of "the system of discrimination & bias" and NOT a natural tendency?

I honestly think that this basic idea should be challenged.

/u/Salamacast, May 12, 2020

Social construction feminism, and the understanding that gender roles are fabricated by people with certain outcomes in mind, become essential in understanding and contextualizing the arguments made by the users in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. Their arguments in this area are structured to reposition gender equity as an unnatural position, and counterproductive to individual and group wellbeing. The reliance on sexual dimorphism and assumed human biological imperatives (e.g., hunting versus gathering) allow them to ignore power, historical structures, and other layers of influence when proposing inequality as the human status quo.

Technofeminism

Technologies[40] and users have always come together to form a new kind of co-constructed entity, a cyborg that cannot exist without the contributions of both parts. The cyborg created through co-construction provides an especially useful metaphor for understanding how digital technology-user hybridization occurs through social internet spaces like reddit. Doing so recycles the ways that Haraway (1990, 2006) used the cyborg to help frame understandings of gender, race, and identity over 30 years ago, by imbricating technologies and users in ways that cannot privilege one over the other. Stone (1995) considers this kind of technological integration into

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[40] Here I mean all technologies, but this is especially prescient in a time of ubiquitous mobile computing and the internet of things.

the human a prosthesis. The notion of the cyborg (or prosthetic technologies) and the complex interface between human and technology which are at its core, are essential to the technofeminist perspective which simultaneously "treats technology as a socio-technical product, enabling us to conceive of a mutual shaping relationship between gender and technology" (Wajcman, 2006, p. 15). It also "points beyond the discourse of the digital divide to the connections between gender inequality and other forms of inequality, which come into view if we examine the broader political and economic basis of the networks that shape and deploy technical systems" (Wajcman, 2004, p. 121). In doing so, explains Wajcman, technofeminism "eschews both the lingering tendency to view technology as necessarily patriarchal and the temptation to essentialize gender," both bringing into alignment valuations of human and machine, as well as acknowledging that technological development can serve as both bane and boon in gendered politics.

Technofeminism provides the primary focus for feminist analysis in this research and allows for a multimodal approach to the analysis of technological and cultural phenomena. Technology is neither the utopic solution to our misbalanced sex/gender systems, nor the persistent tool of the patriarchy to systematically oppress the 'other'. Growing from a combination of the work of social construction feminist ideas, cyborg feminism, cyberfeminism, critical cultural studies, and the social studies of science and technology, technofeminism tries to bridge feminism's conflicted utopic and dystopic relationship with technology (Wajcman, 2004, 2006, 2007). Technofeminism, says Wajcman (2006),

> "fuses the insights of new streams of gender theory with a thoroughgoing materialist approach to the social studies of technology. … this approach treats technology as a socio-technical product, enabling us to conceive of a mutual shaping relationship between gender and technology (see for example Oudshoorn et al., 2004). Technology is then understood as both a source and a consequence of gender relations" (p. 15).

For technofeminism, technology is not neutral, and its creation and development are bound by the social and cultural spaces where it was created, and those who created it. "Such an approach shares the constructivist conception of technology as a sociotechnical network, and recognizes the need to integrate the material, discursive and social elements of technoscientific practice" (Wajcman, 2004, p. 107). Wajcman frames the intersections of the social and technological in a way which maps easily to my research site, explaining that "technology is always a

socio-material product - a seamless web or network combining artefacts, people, organizations, cultural meanings and knowledge" (2004, p. 106); overlapping co-creation always in the process of becoming.

Wacjman's conceptualizations of interwoven and co-created technologies and gender prescriptions do not apply only to digital technologies, and other researchers have made these connections to other technological developments. Using the office as an illustrative backdrop, Laurence Rickels (1997) describes how the development and implementation of office technologies have served to reinforce and entrench gendered ordering of work and social power. Rickels shows the "underworld of our mass-media culture" (p. 70) through the stories of typists and telephone operators, and uses these lessons to explain that modern, Western feminism "has always been on the way to techno feminism" (p. 70). The social setting of technology and technological development is as important as the technology itself, and "what we call 'the social' is bound together as much as by the technical as by the social. Society itself is built along with objects and artefacts" (Wajcman, 2004, p. 39). The same is true of digital computing and the history of women as pioneers and essential agents in digital computing, computer science, and programming (Abbate, 2012; Hicks, 2017). The active inclusion of women in certain roles (e.g., programming and machine operation), their exclusion from others (e.g., project management), and their erasure from the histories of computing most often told, are telling of the gender dynamics at play in the power, control, and capitalism related to computing (Margolis & Fisher, 2003). The structures and precedents set in the social context of the 1950s and 1960s around women in computing have through lines to today's sex and gender issues in tech (Bulut, 2021; Vogels, 2021). For a specific and dark example, Anita Thaler (2014) is among the many authors (see also Braithwaite, 2016; Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2017; among others) who explore #gamergate[41] (and Thaler's work looks specifically at reddit) to show how the social constructs and affordances around media products allow for deep and disturbing harassment, while simultaneously allowing for exposure and messaging by the harassed.

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[41] #Gamergate was a loosely coordinated set of misogynistic attacks and threats to women game developers, journalists, and critics meant to silence these women and agender individuals through fear, intimidation, and violence (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2017; Schultz et al., 2021).

Since Wajcman's foundational work, and the work of others like Rickels (1997), technofeminism has been taken up in a variety of ways: examining girls' technology camps (Almjeld, 2018); investigating toxic troll commenting culture (Clinnin & Manthey, 2019); interrogating the relationships that medical technologies prescribe to women's bodies and potentially undermine their agency (Frost & Haas, 2017); as a way to democratise technological innovation (Shivers-McNair et al., 2018); and as a way to explore feminist theoretical development relative to technologies and technological socio-cultural roles over time (DeVoss, 2019). Technofeminism has been most recently and most effectively taken up by black scholars and other scholars of colour in exploring the relationships between black women (and other women of colour) to technologies, particularly relative to the policing, oppression, and subjugation of people of colour (especially women) (Benjamin, 2019; Browne, 2015; Buolamwini, 2017; Noble, 2018b), and to critique the ongoing issues of overwhelming Whiteness and Westernism in technofeminist theory and practice (DeCook, 2020).

Reddit as a platform (and as software until the code moved away from being open source in 2017), is a socio-material product by design, where users bring and discuss content and over time the site has developed and evolved along with its users (Lagorio-Chafkin, 2018). Technofeminism provides theory to see reddit and its users as interwoven and inextricably connected and informing one of the other. These deep social ties are best explored not with large data sets and decontextualized data, but rather through the rhetorics and experiences of the individuals and small groups which live them.

Feminist Studies of Men and Masculinity

The feminist studies of men is focused on understanding men as gendered beings, alongside women, who encounter and are potentially subjugated by the same types of gendered understandings about behaviour, action, and expression as women (Dowd, 2010; Tarrant, 2009; van der Gaag, 2014). Importantly, men are affected by these gendered understandings in similar, but also different ways than women, leading to some profound differences in gendered experiences of similar phenomena. (Pleasants, 2011; R. M. Schmitz & Haltom, 2017). It is also important to recognize that in some ways, (almost) all of feminist inquiry is, at least in part, study of men insofar as it reflects or refracts patriarchal power and gender issues imbued within hierarchies. I do not mean to imply that feminism is about men, so much as indicate that the study of men through feminist theory should not be out of place, even when that study is

expressly about men and men's experience. Where feminism is situated as an antithetical perspective to patriarchy, then feminist inquiry is always situated as a critical study of men, and the social positions they inhabit and (sometimes) perpetuate.

In this case, men are not the foil matched against women's subordination and possible emancipation, but instead are the subject of their own examination to expand and explore the complexity of their own gendered experience (Flood, 2011; C. W. Johnson, 2013; Landreau & Murphy, 2011; Lorber, 2012; Roussel & Downs, 2008). What the feminist studies of men reveal is that men, alongside women, experience the world as gendered beings, and although men maintain a level of cultural privilege associated with being male in a patriarchal society, not all men benefit in the same ways from that privilege. There are hierarchies at work even within the seeming homogenous group of men – or even subgroups like White, middle class men (Dowd, 2010; M. Kimmel, 2017; Landreau, 2011; Precopio et al., 2017; Tarrant, 2009).

The works of important masculinities scholars like R.W. Connell, Michael Messner, Jack Halberstam, Micheal Flood, and others, have been actively informed by feminist theory, but these scholars present as sociologists, psychologists, men's studies, or queer scholars, rather than feminist scholars. Their work, and the work of others, is about masculinity and its place in social and personal embodiments, not necessarily the emancipatory outcomes of feminism more broadly. This might be because they began academic careers prior to the rise of the more inclusive and accepting nature of third-wave feminist spaces. It may also be because to functionalize feminist theory for other disciplines, active use of, but not dedication to, feminism has been more productive. There are also male-identified scholars who name themselves feminists and use feminist theory actively and openly in their scholarship. In leisure studies this is exemplified by Corey Johnson (2013, 2014), but this type of out-front male feminist scholar is less common than the pro-feminist scholars listed above. Together, the work of these scholars has established a solid grounding in the feminist studies of men (Mares, 2014).

The most salient potential critique of my own work grounded in feminism, and about men's participation in feminism more broadly, is the potential to, knowingly or otherwise, co-opt feminist theory and practice. This co-optation could be a way of differentiating or somehow highlighting my own work, or clandestinely undermining feminism altogether. Dowd (2010) discussed this possibility, suggesting that men doing work in feminism could be understood as a form of imperialism; that there is no way for men to be made class-equivalent to women,

regardless of perspective. The broader critique of male co-optation is taken up at length in Okun's (2014) edited book on the pro-feminist men's movement, especially in chapters by Mares (2014) and Kimmel (2014), but this discussion is largely about pro-feminism rather than feminist identity. As a man working with feminist theory and social justice, I must be carefully reflexive about my own positions of power, influence, and prejudice as I work (C. W. Johnson, 2013; C. W. Johnson & Cousineau, 2018). The challenges of this approach and a discussion of the ethics of my work as presented in this document come later in this section.

Intersectionality and Feminism

The question of a place for intersectionality and intersectional thinking in my research is an important one, and the relationship of intersectionality to the work presented in this dissertation is explored below. Intersectionality has been theorised and contextualized as a concept, heuristic device, paradigm, framework, and theory (Collins & Bilge, 2016), "a conceptual tool for understanding and interrupting social phenomena" (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2019, p. 52), a discourse, and "as a lens for examining how critical analysis and social action might inform one another" (Collins, 2019, p. 3). The breadth and depth of penetration that intersectionality has had in academics, popular media, politics, and law, asserts Collins (2019), owes much to the initial presentation and use of the term as a metaphor for the overlapping, interacting, and interconnected experiences of oppression and marginalization experienced by women of colour (Crenshaw, 1990; Guidroz & Berger, 2009, p. 65). The use of metaphor allowed the concept to have wide appeal and applicability – the notion of the intersection, or the coming together of elements from different trajectories is deeply familiar and easy to conceptualize. The wide adoption of the concept has led, inevitably to conflicts in its potential application(s), various meaning-making processes, and genealogies of the concept and the way that it can be (or should be) applied to theory that came before or was contemporaneous with Crenshaw's work (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Thirty years after Crenshaw brought the concept to academic life, and because of its broad appeal, Patricia Hill Collins argues that "without serious self-reflection, intersectionality could easily become just another social theory that implicitly upholds the status quo" (p. 2); another form of "academic bullshit". In her book calling for scholars to situate intersectionality as critical social theory, Collins (2019) names the core constructs of intersectionality as relationality, power, social inequality, social context, complexity, and social justice, and argues

that intersectionality without any one of these elements, especially a focus on social justice, is in danger of being co-opted for purposes that do not forward equity work. The presupposition that social justice is always already part of intersectionality is the greatest danger, since without an express social justice orientation, the other elements of intersectional thinking can lead us to dark places. As an example, Collins presents eugenics as a "once normal science" that "drew upon understandings of race, gender, class, nation, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability in ways that made its core premises intelligible and that simultaneously generated support for its political goals" (p. 16). But eugenics was a science dedicated to the subjugation and oppression of populations of people. It was a 'scientific' way to maintain and enshrine power that still reverberates in important ways (including being taken up in renewed and troubling ways by ultranationalists and white supremacists (Fair, 2019; Paul et al., 2017)), and is therefore an important illustration of why the elements of intersectionality must all be present and working in concert.

With the multiplicity of applications for intersectionality and the confusion about both its onto-epistemological (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013) and practical application (Collins, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2016), it is with some trepidation that I engage with the concept of intersectional feminism. Intersectionality, in many ways, has moved from "being a sign of threat and conflict to (White) feminism, to a consensus-creating signifier that not only made the concept successful but also enabled an institutionalization of a liberal, 'all-inclusive' feminism based on a denial of power as constitutive for all subjects (and non-subjects alike)" (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013, p. 234). My thinking about employing an intersectional feminism, then, is complicated by this fact in that, as a White, cis-het man, does my use of this perspective further the 'all-inclusivity' that potentially waters down the power of the concept itself? I understand that intersectionality extends from a black feminist perspective (Crenshaw, 1990, 2019, 2020), but the breadth and depth of its use makes the distinction of an intersectional feminism challenging for me without feelings of co-option.

Seeing intersectionality, and subsequently intersectional feminism, as a discourse (Collins, 2019; McKibbin et al., 2015) has allowed me to better justify its use in my thinking and has calmed fears of contributing to the appropriation of the concept for my own ends. Building from McKibbin et al. (2015), where "discourse creates an object of knowledge, which determines who can speak and be heard in relation to a particular discourse, and is characterised

by certain tropes or ways of speaking about the object of knowledge" (p. 101), intersectionality creates an object of knowledge that reflects on the relationality, power, social inequality, social context, and complexity a given place, time, historical circumstance, and assemblage of subjects that is always framed by social justice.

The discourse of intersectionality also remains ontologically promiscuous, which allows it to contend with other feminist discourses (e.g., poststructural feminism), and remain open to a variety of methodological and praxis orientations. It creates a feminist voice that, reflexive of Collins' (2019) core constructs, simultaneously calls on researchers and thinkers to include all of them in research and theorisation, and can be open to White, hetero men. So, while the focus of intersectional thinking as presented by Crenshaw is theorized around black women and blackness more generally, considering it as a discourse in my work allows me to create an object of knowledge that examines relationality, power, social inequality, context, and complexity with race as a component, but not the primary focus.

To think with intersectionality, but not foreground race as the central axis of considerations is not a move to leave race out, but rather a result of my praxis and positionality as a White man whose focus is on masculinities. My training in feminist and masculinities theory has attenuated me to see different things, so while race and its effects are undoubtedly present in the context of my data, I am not (currently) equipped with the right tools to see it. I did not code for race or racialized language as I conducted my research, and I am admittedly less well equipped to identify, parse out, and analyse than others would be with the same data set.

Race, while not discussed overtly or frequently enough in my data to push through my blindness to its presence and influence, impacts the data through a presumptive White standard. Described by authors like Balkenhol and Schramm (2019) as an absent presence, it is precisely the absence of discussions of race that allows users to assume the White male standard (M'charek et al., 2014), so while posts and comments (especially from /r/MensRights) regularly come from southern European countries (e.g., Spain) as well as India and Pakistan, the cultural and geographical differences in sex/gender role assumptions are rarely discussed. Examples from these countries are regularly taken up by (presumably North American) users as examples of the global influence of feminism, and a global coordinated effort to subordinate men. The lack of recognition about important inter-cultural differences and racial considerations involved in trying to discuss a universal men's experience indicates that the posters and commenters are likely not

consciously thinking very much about race. This is something that generally indicates, especially in technology (but in all aspects of life), that the speaker is White and the presumptive audience of users is White as well (Benjamin, 2019; Buolamwini, 2017; Noble, 2013).

Masculinities Theories

Perhaps not coincidentally, misogynist men's rights activism and academic study of men and masculinities share roots in the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Academic feminism had torn apart the notions of broad and singular gender-blind representations that were (and in some places remain) the vanguards of social science. Authors Betty Friedan (1963), Germaine Greer (1970), and The Combahee River Collective (1979) propelled critical feminist inquiry; critical inquiry that was taken up in fields like leisure studies by scholars like Karla Henderson (1990) and Sue Shaw (1985).[42] In the 1970s men like Warren Farrell (1975) were beginning to agitate for recognition of men's gendered experiences of subordination, and academics were beginning to study men as gendered beings with socially contingent experiences based in male identities. Even though Farrell went on to become the academic vanguard of the men's rights movement (1996, 2012), the contributions made by him and others at the time, combined with the feminist work illuminating gender as an important element of social inquiry, opened up opportunity to authors like Micheal Messner, James Messerschmidt, R.W. Connell, and Micheal Kimmel to begin work on men and masculinity expressly. This is the birth of the modern study of men and masculinities.

In the 40 years since the modern study of masculinities began to take shape, exploring men's experiences as men and the ways that masculinity is enacted and disciplined has expanded significantly. While a genealogy of masculinities is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the pertinent theories of masculinities representation are covered here to provide context to the discussions of discourses and engendering of masculinity that follow. I will spend some time on Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, to establish its usefulness in discussions about the malleability or multiplicity of masculinity as it is represented by users online. I will also touch on hybrid and geek masculinities, as these provide additional context for later chapters and

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[42] It is important to acknowledge that although I have included The Combahee River Collective here, their work and the work of other feminists of colour was not taken up as readily or as quickly as the White feminist scholars I have included. This is part of a regular critique of second wave feminism– a whitewashing or erasure of women of colour as part of the feminist movement under the banner of representation of 'all' women. This generalization is ironic given the push for representation inherent in the second wave.

discussions of masculinities discourses. I will borrow from Karla Elliott's (2020) work using notions of open and closed masculinities, and her spatial metaphor of the closed centre and open margins to discuss how these forms of masculinity make it accessible in some spaces, but also close them off in others. The work of explicating and situating these diverse masculinities will then lead into a discussion about how masculinities intersect with the digital landscape and create spaces that are filled by anti-feminist men's groups.

Hegemonic Masculinity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity and elucidating its influence on individuals and society comes from the work of R.W. Connell (1995/2005; 1985). Connell used and extended the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971) who had taken up Marx's work on hegemons from ancient Greek. The hegemon in Marx's interpretation was a domineering leader and creator of norms that serve those in power (Boswell, 2004). Gramsci concluded that the leader figure was not required for hegemony to function, and that it could exist in any relationships between those who have power and those who do not (C. W. Johnson et al., 2015). Connell (1995/2005) explains that hegemonic masculinity is "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (p. 77). As Corey Johnson and I have written elsewhere in our review of hegemonic masculinity and its application in feminist research on masculinity, "hegemony requires no physical force and instead operates through indirect coercion (valued ideologies) and unconscious consent, such as an individual's desire to seek acceptance or be considered normal." (C. W. Johnson & Cousineau, 2018, p. 129).

For Connell, the generative capacity of indirect coercion and unconscious consent gives the cultural markers of masculinity enormous hegemonic power. The value of all men in the system of hegemonic masculinity is always measured against and with power over women, but also serves to create hierarchical and divisional structures between men (Messerschmidt, 2018). These hierarchical and divisional structures come to be through multiple pathways (family and peer-group social influence, media, cultural norms, etc.) that make hegemonic processes and ideals a matrix rather than monolithic (Halberstam, 2011). This matrix structure also makes hegemonic masculinity malleable and allows it to flex and change with changes in cultural norms, between cultures, and between generations. The hegemonic masculinity of my uncles is not the same as my father's, and none are the same as mine.

While Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity has been critiqued, many of those critiques have been reflexive of the ways that the concept was taken up by others, rather than Connell's original formulation. James Messerschmidt (2018) explores those critiques in detail, as well as critiques that contributed to Connell and Messerschmidt's revisitation and partial reformulation of hegemonic masculinities theory (2005). Chief among the complaints about hegemonic masculinity is that it can become a stand-in for simpler and more rigid concepts of the performance of masculinity, or "a scientific-sounding synonym for a type of rigid, domineering, sexist, 'macho' man" (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 39). The move some scholars made in using hegemonic masculinity to reflect dominant characteristics is an example of what Christine Beasley (2008) calls "slippage," where the representation of characteristics that are dominant in the representation of masculinity are not necessarily hegemonic; they may not contribute directly to legitimating men's power over women and other men (Messerschmidt, 2018). What Beasley and Messerschmidt are getting at is that when we put too much emphasis on the masculinity part of hegemonic masculinity, and begin to ignore the hegemonic part, we lose the significance of the concept in thinking with theory about masculinity and its affects on people, places, and societies. Using hegemonic masculinity as a theory, we can begin to understand the different performances of masculinities that find homes within men's groups online. We can also begin to draw connections between them and the community representations put forward through their diverse types of involvements and actions online and offline.

Hybrid Masculinity

The term hybrid comes from botany and is used to describe a species that is produced through the mixing of two (or more) separate species. Hybridization is often done to bring characteristics of one species to another, with the hope that the hybrid version will be superior to the donor species. It is in the context of bringing traits from one to another that the term hybrid is used in relation to masculinity. Hybrid masculinity "refers to men's selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 246), and is done for a variety of reasons. The concept of the hybridization of masculinity is not new, and masculinities scholars like Micheal Messner have been writing about the incorporation of identity elements from marginalized groups by privileged men since the early 1990s (Messner, 1993). On the surface, the idea of hybridized masculinities seems to open room within the canon of acceptable masculinity

representations and embodiments to people who, for whatever reason, do not fit in traditional understandings of masculinity. Anderson (2008) saw hybridization in this way, and coined inclusive masculinity as a way to express their view of reductions in inequality and challenging gender and sexual social systems. Anderson's inclusive masculinity seems almost emancipatory in rendering more open the closed centre of masculinities to the margins (K. Elliott, 2020). However, as Bridges and Pascoe (2014) point out, the hybridization of masculinities is entirely more complicated than the opening up of a closely guarded center, and often serves as a means of re-entrenchment and re-marginalization of non-hegemonic masculinities through the selective and ultimately exclusionary incorporation of specific, safe elements from the margins. Bridges and Pascoe suggest that hybrid masculinity is cast as a kind of smoke screen, "further entrenching, and often concealing, inequality in new ways" (p. 250), and suggest the following consequences of hybrid masculinity.

The first of Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) consequences of hybridization is discursive distancing. Hybridization creates a kind of rhetorical separation between concepts of hegemonic masculinity and the White, straight men that most commonly take on hybridized masculinities. In creating that discursive distance, say Bridges and Pascoe "[men] also (and often more subtly) align themselves with it" (p. 250) by expressing qualities that reaffirm dominance and typical hegemonic masculine forms. Bridges and Pascoe use the work of Messner (2007) and Messerschmidt (2010) to explore how, by incorporating selective narratives of caring, compassion, and vulnerability, political leaders who are men in the United States have been able to perpetuate strong man images that have propelled public policy internationally, while also reaping the benefits of "softer" masculinities. By incorporating these characteristics into their public-facing personas, they are distanced from traditional strongman political figuration, but make no substantive policy moves in that direction – the distance is discursive.

The second consequence is strategic borrowing. Strategic borrowing is the essentialized use by White, straight men, of identity markers forged through battles for rights and recognition – the grafting of a positionality of oppression onto White masculinity. It is the appropriation of traits to replace a White, straight masculinity seen as meaningless and without an identity beyond the perceived pejorative. Strategic borrowing is perhaps the most prescient of the traits of hybrid masculinities for my research, since in strategic borrowing White men frame themselves as victims, allowing them to take up discourses of being disaffected and combatants against

inequity. This grafting of a positionality of oppression onto White masculinity allows the hybrid masculine persona to claim new territory of representation while not really giving up much actual power or social control. Bridges and Pascoe use Hughey's (2012) work on anti-racist and White nationalist groups to illustrate how White supremacist masculinity functionalises the concept of being "under attack" to claim status as both warriors and oppressed persons, without giving up the privilege of being representative of White, straight, state power.[43] Kelly's (2020) book positions masculinity and white nationalism in concert as elements that some men feel are under simultaneous and coordinated attack that will lead to the dissolution of modern society. These connected elements leading to the development of prepper culture, armed and racialized militia culture, and apocalyptic cultism. Daniels (2009a) examined racism and White supremacy online, and exposed the coordinated and multi-facetted ways that these forces worked against civil rights and equity (See also Aharoni & Féron, 2020; Ferber, 2000; A. Kelly, 2017). Not only does this appropriation not diminish the power of these White men, or work actively against inequality, it perpetuates the marginalization of "poor men, working-class men, religious men, undereducated men, rural men, and men of color (among others) as the bearers of uneducated, backwards, toxic, patriarchal masculinities" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 253). The appropriation of oppression and victimhood is a mainstay of /r/MensRights (and /r/TheRedPill but in different ways), where the ideological ethos of the group is predicated on men as the subordinated class in Western society – "New here but just wanna put this here. Femininist (the bad crazy ones) belive that womens rights aren't enough and men have more rights. There is no actual men's rights. Men have basic HUMAN rights where as women actually have thier own set of rights. Right?" (/u/mr_skullduggery, March, 2020). The anti-feminism that is expressed in the group is an outgrowth of this, and blames feminism for a cultural pivot towards the oppression of men.

The last consequence of a hybridized masculinity is the fortification of boundaries. While White straight men might seem to blur boundaries between culturally dominant forms of masculine representation and other forms of masculinity by engaging with hybridity, in doing so they often engage in what Donovan (1998) calls "masculine rescripting." Rather than re-writing the codes of masculinity to open up a closed centre to the margins (K. Elliott, 2020), new discourses are re-inscribed as masculine ideals for the purposes of domination and control. So,

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[43] Play on words intentional.

while opening options within the palette of masculine representation, each of these is leveraged to maintain cultural hegemony through masculinity.

In all of Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) consequences of hybrid masculinity, but especially in the fortification of boundaries, we see the application by the members of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill of what Demetriou (2001) calls dialectical pragmatism where: "the fundamental class is in constant, mutual dialectical interaction with the allied groups and appropriates what appears pragmatically useful and constructive for the project of domination at a particular historical moment" (p. 345). For example, the maintenance of the idea of 'Alpha men' within /r/TheRedPill in done by employing a fluctuating and obfuscating 'openness' to a variety of ways of being – "The alpha spectrum is huge" (/u/javiercer20, April 2020). This thread is illustrative because through the long text post the author describes how he was "the type of guy who believed the only type of alpha males was a 6'3 ripped dude with tattoos all over and a tough attitude, spitting bad words all over the place and driving a tuned noisy challenger...." but learned that it was a lot about attitude when a "less attractive" co-worker was able to have sex with the woman he desired. The point the author is making is that being Alpha is about attitude over body type, although the utility of being fit, tall, and good looking is never rendered unimportant. The pivot around attitude and its influence on who can be 'Alpha' is always relative to the performance of 'Beta' traits, so even as attitude is co-opted and rendered an effective means of exercising domination, what is Alpha behaviour is only ever measured against what is believed to be Beta at a given moment.

Beta attitudinal traits stop /u/javiercer20 from being sexually satisfied, and stop others from maintaining control over their relationships. In another user's case, this meant being cheated on, seen as a relationship-based outcome of embodying Beta traits.

> "I learned this the hard way also. I'm not super tall or anything but I'm good looking and fit. I thought that was the cornerstone of alpha. Now I'm getting divorced because my wife cheated on me hellaaaa times. You know what I learned? I'm not alpha at all, doesn't matter how much I look it, chicks smell your weakness" (/u/JCX_Pulse, April 29, 2020).

The dialectical pragmatism of the group allows for movement in what it means to be Alpha, and for those who do not meet the physical markers laid out by the ideology to also have a place

within a spectrum of acceptable masculinity. But, this is always relative to some other, not-acceptable performance of masculinity that helps create an us/them yes/no relationship relative to behaviours and performances, and re-inscription of new boundaries is often the product of the act of appropriation.

Masculinity, Masculine Embodiment, Digital Technologies, and the Internet

The internet is a terrible place to be a woman. The existence of revenge pornography,[44] or serious death and rape threats to women journalists,[45] are clear indications of that. The inflated and vitriolic gender discourses online have to do, at least in part, with the ability to enact simultaneously the embodiment of masculinity in its most aggressive forms, while being able to remain anonymous with little fear of direct recourse – "to discuss geek and nerd culture is to discuss masculinity—in particular, White male masculinity" (Massanari, 2017, p. 332). Even before current social networking sites like Instagram, or Geo-Social Networking Applications (GSNAs) like Tinder or Grindr - where photographs play an important role in participant identification - individuals were living the embodied nature of presented genders online. Cherny (1994) found that users who presented as men on Multi-User Dungeons (MUD)s were far less likely to emote affectionate "hugs" or "whuggles" than their female or otherwise gendered counterparts. Turkle's (1995, 1996) extensive discussions on gender swapping in the text-based MUDs of the time showed how users embodied their characters, insofar as they believed their online activities were as real as their offline activities. In different ways, both examples are about how the virtual setting allows individuals to project and provisionally experience other social roles, but those social roles are always tied to the lived social experience of the individual in their "real-life" context.

The foundational elements of these ideas of projection are discussed by Schaap (2006) as he relates the disembodied nature of virtual personas to poststructuralist and postmodern theories. Schaap explains that if the "'natural facts' of life are really our own social constructions, then we can 'rewrite' the rules" which would allow for the "possibility of (co)constructing the self, their genders, and their surrounding in direct…interaction" (p. 237).

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[44] Revenge porn "involves the public release online of photos of an identified person's sexual activity that were originally meant for exclusive viewing by an intimate partner, for purposes of revenge" (Langlois & Slane, 2017, p. 121). One kind of non-consensual pornography, it is outlawed in most of the United States (Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, 2021) and Canada (Allen, 2019).

[45] See Chess and Shaw (2015) for an excellent analysis of this.

Although a seeming utopic expression of the post-structuralist nature of virtual worlds, Schaap cites the works of Kendall (2002) and Herring (1994) to help indicate that many online spaces have evolved into masculine spaces, with social codes and behaviour shaped by traditionalist heteronormative and hegemonic expectations. Expressions of female identification/embodiment are strictly policed. This strict gendering extends to the technologies themselves. Kate O'Riordan (2006) explains that we give service technologies historically feminine characteristics such as "malleable, semi-innocent, vulnerable, attractive, and naturalized" (p. 247), while simultaneously being sexy and desirable. Our most common helping technologies today (Apple's *Siri*, Amazon's *Alexa*, Google's female voiced assistant service)[46] stand in sharp contrast to the male personified knowledge super-computer robots like IBM's *Watson*. Thoughts and understandings about the gendered embodiments of technologies extend far beyond naming and voicing; they are embedded in the infrastructure and developmental structures of those pieces of tech. While a thorough exploration of the history of networked computer technologies and systems is beyond the scope of this work, and there are a number of internet histories that either ignore or pass over the contributions of women as foundational contributors to this development, there are a number of histories of digital computers, technologies, and the people who helped develop and popularise them that do not erase the indispensable contributions and presence of women (see Abbate, 1999, 2012; Hicks, 2017; Margolis & Fisher, 2003).

Geek Masculinity

Hybrid masculinity and developing digital technologies provide several direct and useable examples of how changes in the ways that masculinity is represented are useful in understanding masculinity in online men's spaces like reddit. The concept of geek masculinity (Braithwaite, 2016; Lockhart, 2015; Massanari, 2015; A. Salter & Blodgett, 2017) provides a cultural example of the principles of hybridization and a window into different, but similar, ways that the inclusion of previously derided traits in discourses of acceptable masculinity have shifted power in a connected world. The move of geekdom away from the margins toward a culturally valued representation has been underway since the early 1980s, and referencing some of the early work on masculinity and computing is important to draw contextual lines for the evolution of geek masculinity. Ethnographic work on early networked communities discussed the influence of masculinities and their hold on technologies through the lens of gendered experiences. Lori

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[46] You can change most of these to have a male voice, but the default for these "assistant" technologies is female.

Kendall (1998) and Sean Zdenek's (1999) works on Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) are good examples of how users performed their own gatekeeping about gender roles online that matched offline expectations about technology (and computers in particular) as the domain of men and boys. Authors like Fergus Murray (1993), Mary Ware and Mary Stuck (1985), and Sidney Kaplan (1983) were exploring the associations between masculinity and computer technologies before there were networked interactions like in MUDs. Ware and Stuck's (1985) work provides interesting insight into computer magazine advertisements in the early 1980s and the deeply gendered representations of computer users in the nascent popularization of personal computing.

The integration of geekdom into valued masculinity becomes a new kind of *Revenge of the Nerds*, except now the nerds and jocks are one in the same (for reading on the idea of "brogrammers" see: Kumar, 2014; Reagle, 2013). Geek masculinity has been taken up by other authors who are examining the relationships between embodied understandings of masculine identity and power online (Braithwaite, 2016; Marwick, 2017), and the concept is present in work on queer women of colour in gaming culture (Nakamura, 2012). The power exerted by geek masculinity to oppress other identities features in these works, and they offer important insight into how the previously marginalized geek identity was able to gain a foothold of power. This push to power is less about the rise of geeks, and more about abating the loss of masculine identity as segments of social power move away from traditional markers of masculine identity (athleticism, physical dominance, mechanical ability), and toward technological expertise and acumen. By integrating geeks into who can represent a masculine ideal, the masculine becomes situated to control technological space as it does athletic space, and does not risk losing power to other identities, be they gendered, raced, sexualized, or otherwise. For Nakamura, the more (gaming) capital becomes identified with White masculinity, the more bitter the battles for space and more visceral the responses to embodiments different from that White, geek masculinity will become.

Similar to Kendall's article *Nerd Nation* (1999)*,* Salter and Blodgett (2017) explain in their book on toxic geek masculinity that the success of the movie *Revenge of the Nerds*, in the time of the initial surge in personal computing and computer-oriented geek success and fame, created possibilities for legitimating geekdom as an accepted personal identity. Prior to the foregrounding of nerds as potential heroes (through *Revenge of the Nerds*), and elites (e.g. Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos as early tech billionaires), the nerd/geek occupied a social narrative of

vulnerability (the oppressed) – a useful but marginalized individual who lacked the masculine characteristics required to excel in a patriarchal world (Lockhart, 2015). But with the development of computing technologies as a means to gain wealth and power, as well as control over others, the geek/nerd developed narratives of being the oppressor and the technocrat that thrust the geek into newly accessible positions of domination (Lockhart, 2015). The transition that renders accessible positions of domination for geek identity carries with it implications for masculinity. Geek identity remains highly gendered and so the rise of the geek is entangled with the changing social construction of what it means to "be a man," and especially a man with power and control (Massanari, 2015).

Digital Spaces as Leisure Spaces

The internet and digitally mediated leisure time activity have an interesting place within the leisure literature. In some cases it has been embraced as a fulsome part of the leisure landscape (see Arora, 2014; Spracklen, 2015), and elsewhere is treated as a kind of othered space where internet involvement, or involvement with mobile technologies, are seen as adjacent to leisure, pathological in its use, or detrimental to presence in leisure (Harmon & Duffy, 2021; Lin et al., 2009; Vandelanotte et al., 2009).

Pathologized leisure internet use, where leisure time internet activity is seen as detrimental to health and well-being, is prevalent in the health literature associated with leisure. Studies in this area touch on a variety of factors, but generally pattern leisure internet use as contributing to negative health consequences, including but not limited to: lack of sleep (Kim et al., 2018); obesity (Vandelanotte et al., 2009); and a significant amount about boredom and addiction (Lin et al., 2009; Suris et al., 2014). The research highlighted here positions leisure time internet use as contributing to negative outcomes for the users, and feels immediately dated in that it largely seems to discount the connected nature of the world today.

Rather more interesting is the literature which positions leisure time internet use as engrained in the deeper leisure contexts of people's lives. Although it is worth noting that current leisure publications are often not on the bleeding edge of discussions of internet-based lives,[47] there are authors and publications that are moving the bar forward in making internet-based

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[47] Best to see publications in communications and media studies, science and technology studies, game culture, and other socio-technical disciplines for that.

leisure part of the leisure spectrum, rather than an interesting footnote on "real" leisure. There are a growing number of books in the field which address issues of internet use and digital leisure. In addition to the aforementioned books by Karl Spracklen (2015) and Payal Arora (2014), there are recent publications on critical perspectives about digital leisure cultures (Carnicelli et al., 2017), and the dilemmas created within leisure domains by the infiltration of digital technologies (Parry, Johnson, & Fullagar, 2018). While certainly doing the work of positioning digital leisure practices as leisure, these works leave the placing of digital leisure within existing leisure frameworks to others. Authors have done so by discussing internet leisure use as positively contributing to life quality and well-being across the life course (Coker, 2011; Lepp, 2018; Leung & Lee, 2005; Lifshitz et al., 2018; Lopez et al., 2019; Valtchanov et al., 2016). Some have also taken on concepts of community online, and navigating changing social situational politics through online communities (S. Henderson & Spracklen, 2018; Holt, 2011; Robinson & Holt, 2020; Torres, 2020; Valtchanov & Parry, 2017). There is also a strong body of literature focused on the use of internet and mobile technologies in tourism (Adam, 2019; Chen et al., 2019; Standing et al., 2014). Where the leisure literature falls short, and where I contribute to this important body of work, is in discussions about the false dichotomy between online and offline leisure, and the seeming apprehension to accept and discuss technologically and internet-based leisure on the same level as offline or active leisure pursuits.

Digitally mediated lives, communication, and the Internet

It would be difficult to overstate the ubiquity of technologically mediated interfaces in our lives, from vehicles with multiple computers working together, to the devices I am using to write, and the device you are using to read this work. Each of these technologies (as well as the others we use every day) are layered with infrastructure, platforms, software, and interfaces which both give us control (or the illusion of control), and simultaneously imbricate us into social and technological constructs which are designed, engineered, and informed by people and their beliefs. In the following sections, I will explore some of the significant elements of these digital mediations, community online, and how reddit brings all these things together.

Platform studies

When discussing computer/technology studies and the internet, platforms are the base hardware and software; they form "the foundation of computational expression" (Bogost & Montfort, 2017). Hardware is the literal "stuff you can kick" (Parks, 2015) of computer and technological

systems. The physical structures we choose dictate what is possible as a technological outcome. This is established by the affordances and the constraints which emerge based on the hardware components used in the system - e.g. you can't make colour graphics with a monochrome platform (Bogost & Montfort, 2017; Leonardi, 2011).

Affordances

I use the term affordances in this section as the commonly used antonym to constraints in new media and technology studies. I do so for simplicity and acknowledging critiques, like Nagy and Neff (2015), of this use of affordances as no longer being able to fully describe what is required with continued development in technological sophistication.

In other places in this dissertation, affordance is used in a way that maps more closely to the way Gibson (1986) theorised the interactions between the objective qualities of a given technology, and the subjective perception by the individual of the utility of that technology. Affordances, when understood in this way, are relational and specific – a kind of perception of utility (Schrock, 2015). Majchrzak and colleagues (2013) called this "the action potential that can be taken by a given technology" (p. 39). It is also used in the very straightforward sense relative to the reddit platform, "literally, what the platform allows its users to do" (W. Phillips, 2015, p. 61). In the case of reddit and the men's groups discussed in this research, reddit allows for certain types of interactions in posts and comments, but the meanings and significance of those limited types of interactions are changed through the quasi-anonymity, asynchronicity, voting structures, sorting mechanisms, and other relational and individual interactions. Affordances become, then, both the obvious actions reddit allows users to do, and what those users perceive as being facilitated by those actions.

The second use of 'platform' in computer technology is base-line software, which provides foundational ordering instructions for the building and use of other software. For example, you are likely reading this digital file on either a PC running Windows, or a Mac running MacOS.[48] Both Windows and MacOS are operating system software platforms that dictate some or all the possible digital outcomes while using them. Operating system platforms are (mostly) not exclusive to specific hardware, but their methods of ordering, sorting, and

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[48] With deference to users of other operating systems like android, or various iterations of Linux (the basic explanation provided here will likely feel simplistic if you are a Linux user).

working with data are slightly different and this changes the possible technological outcomes for other software. In the case of your operating system, the software platform serves the same limiting and permissive functions as a hardware platform.

Internet platforms function in much the same way as software platforms on your local machine. Widely used social networking sites function as platforms like operating systems, ordering and limiting what users can do, and label themselves platforms in marketing and publicity materials (Gillespie, 2010). "A[n internet] platform is, in its most general sense," explains Joss Hands (2013), "a software framework running on the World Wide Web or Internet, in the forms of social media interfaces, apps, or most commonly 'Web 2.0' portals that gather users in interfaces with each other and with the Web and Internet itself; key is the provision for user generated content and intensive interaction" (p. 3). As such, this definition would stretch to include major players such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; but also non-proprietary and open source platforms such as diaspora, Indymedia and Wikipedia (Hands, 2013).

Most important in Hands' definition is the ability of the software platform online to aggregate content to both engage users and generate more content. Reddit meets the criteria set out by Hands for an online platform; it is nearly entirely user-generated content (or at least brought in by users from elsewhere), and generates intensive interaction, producing more content. Reddit sets rules and boundaries for what is permissible and possible, and polices these elements actively and passively (Massanari, 2015). These processes are also dynamic, allowing reddit to adapt to shifts in user base and desired (or undesired/illegal) content (Marwick, 2017; Matias, 2016a).

Platforms, hardware, software, and how these come together through the internet, take on characteristics of infrastructure, thereby becoming both the foundation from which other things are built, and between which connections are made (Plantin et al., 2018). Because platforms behave as infrastructure, they can be interrogated in the same way as other ubiquitous infrastructures (Parks, 2015); by probing the social and political backgrounds of their designs, constructions, and use. Much like critical studies of the social implications of infrastructures (Parks, 2015; Star, 1999), platform studies can look at the ways in which these infrastructural stand-ins monitor, police, and direct our actions in ways that perpetuate social status quos, or moderate cultural discussions to their own ends (Degli Esposti, 2014; Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2014).

The 'who' and 'where' behind the development of platforms is equally important because "instead of [creating] artefacts as neutral or value-free, social relations (including gender relations) are materialised in tools and techniques" (Wajcman, 2010, p. 147). The undercurrents that shape why the platform is created, the complexity of the tools provided, and how these types of "intermediaries really shape public discourse online" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 349), are essential questions and are implicated in Gillespie's exploration of the computational, architectural, figurative, and political meanings embedded in our varied uses of the word platform. It is easy to be complacent about our understanding of platforms as both stable and unbiased. When users who do not fit well into the structures of a given platform emerge, the platform either breaks, adapts, or forces users to adapt to its narrow operating range (Bivens & Haimson, 2016). By this mechanism, platforms, like other technologies, become "both a source and consequence of gender relations" (Wajcman, 2010, p. 149). In other words, if a platform is built by men in a time and space which privileges men, elements of that privilege and prejudice will exist in the platform; its design is both informed by and perpetuates these incongruences. On reddit, this is perhaps best exemplified by the approach to free speech taken on by the founders Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman as young men working on the site in their free time from an elite university residence. Their open policy let all but the most serious cases of hate, violent, or inflammatory speech, as well as other types of contentious content, be posted on the site – content that was rarely, if ever, targeted at men like them. Reddit's approach to content began to change with the 2015 introduction of new content policy (Pao, 2017), and was strengthened in subsequent revisions. The structure of reddit as a platform (with its user-moderated sub-communities, report-based monitoring of harassment content (Carlson & Cousineau, 2020), and reluctance to remove borderline content), and the code that allows it to operate with little (but increasing) automated oversight are important considerations in reddit research.

Software Studies

Software studies necessarily overlap with platform studies, especially on the internet where platforms are portals based in software (Hands, 2013). Software is made up of code, and code is simply sets of instructions and algorithms that, when combined with input, can produce complex digital functions (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011). Understanding this detail is important because code used in the ubiquitous software that controls, enhances, manages, and polices our lives becomes the laws by which those lives must be lived (Lessig, 2006; Noble, 2018b). This is particularly

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salient on the internet, where the infrastructure, interface, and experience are mediated for the user by software. These "emergent and executable properties" (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011, p. 5) allow software to be a presence which we often forget (even my kettle is run by software to control when to stop heating at various temperatures). Software ubiquity forms a "technological unconscious" which we notice only when software ceases to function as anticipated (Graham & Thrift, 2007). That pervasiveness, complexity, and reliance on software, the "taken for granted pre-existing stability" (Geiger, 2014) of these systems, make software and code an important area of inquiry for many of the same social and political reasons as the platforms they comprise or run on.

For Kitchin and Dodge (2011), software seduces the user, and invoking Althusser they explain that "software-driven technologies induce a process of interpellation, wherein people willingly and voluntarily subscribe to and desire their logic, trading potential disciplinary effects against benefits gained" (p. 11). This produces a problematic social state where under the guise of perceived social or personal gain, we may willingly engage in significant surveillance, monitoring, and policing based on the data generated by the software we use every day (Degli Esposti, 2014; van Dijck, 2014). Along with embodying the laws by which software is made, code is increasingly understood as generating and perpetuating the social laws which permeate the everyday actions of coders and users of code (Lessig, 2006). Implanted within the code and the outcomes that it generates then, are the social politics of the coder, sometimes translating into obtuse software issues for users, or more subtle issues which can be attributed to the coder's own life experiences (Hall, 2016). More egregious examples of this phenomenon have come through racist algorithms (Sandvig et al., 2016), or biased facial recognition where, for example, facial recognition products are designed on 'representative' datasets, but produce products that have a difficult time seeing and identifying non-white faces (Bacchini & Lorusso, 2019; Breland, 2017; Buolamwini, 2017; Chebrolu, 2020; Coe & Atay, 2021; Simonite, 2020).[49]

Issues like this place software studies at the heart of discussions about the gendered (and raced) nature of our technological systems. Where the coder (author) of a particular piece of software codes, purposefully or not, their own social experiences and biases into that software,

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[49] For a humorous but pointed take on this type of issue, and the reluctance of companies to address them in highly competitive marketplaces, see Better Off Ted, Season 1, Episode 4 "*Racial Sensitivity*" (Fresco & Glouberman, 2009).

then we are destined to see the personal bias and prejudices (positive or otherwise) play out in that piece of software (Buolamwini, 2017; Lessig, 2006; Sandvig et al., 2016). If nobody involved in the development of a system for facial recognition is black, then that system may fail to do its job when confronted with faces which are black (Breland, 2017; Buolamwini, 2017; Coe & Atay, 2021). Where the coders, developers, and decision-makers in a company which builds and maintains a platform like YouTube or reddit are mostly men, then they can, and likely do, privilege male perspective and male voices over all other voices (Criado-Perez, 2019).

By assuming that software products (e.g., games) and the outputs from software products (e.g., google search results) provide unbiased experiences to users and/or represent the aggregate common interests and preferences of "everyone," we ignore that they are the works of individuals, groups, and algorithms that are always already biased in their very development and code (Benjamin, 2019; O'Neil, 2016). Software studies then is tasked with interrogating these elements of code and programming, even in the face of pushback from industry and users (Criado-Perez, 2019; Hall, 2016; Nakamura, 2012; Noble, 2013, 2018b; O'Neil, 2016; Sandvig et al., 2016).

The algorithmic aggregation of posts, and the logarithmic calculations of user points, are coded by reddit's development teams, and are problematized by the embedded cultural and social biases described above. User backlash to change is perhaps the best example of how these coded algorithms affect user experience on reddit. In May 2014, several new subreddits were added to the default list for new users (and to /r/all/), and some were removed from this list. This move occurred without significant push-back, except for the inclusion of /r/twoxchromosomes (the only included subreddit focused exclusively at women), which caused significant consternation with some users (Massanari, 2017). "Some Redditors," explains Massanari, "expressed dismay and outright anger that they would be confronted by discussions that might discuss sexual assault, or periods, or female body image. Some inquired why /r/MensRights (a subreddit dedicated to the men's rights movement) was not defaulted as well" (p. 339). Ignoring the fact that this request isn't actually a request for parity (while /r/twoxchromosomes is a space for discussions about women's issues, /r/MensRights is an anti-feminist space), the strong push-back does feel like an example of Manne's (2020) entitlement and damaged privilege, where the inclusion of other perspectives equates to an assault on the rights of those in power. Other reddit users feared that elevating /r/twoxchromosomes in this way would flood the subreddit with

hijacking content, making the dedicated users targets of harassment from a vocal minority (Massanari, 2017). This example is salient because the changes made to the aggregation algorithm were coded in at the behest of new top-level management, presumably says Massanari (2017), to widen the reach of reddit to new users. Prior to these changes, the algorithm had quietly privileged subreddits which favoured the "geek masculinity" of reddit's perceived user-base, literally coding a gender bias into the system meant to display the aggregated preferences of all users (Massanari, 2017). By doing so, reddit had designed itself as a privileging masculine space, which permitted both push-back at the inclusion of a single subreddit dedicated to women and women's issues, as well as comments and coordinated action which led to the resignation of the CEO (Ellen Pao) who prompted the changes in the first place (Marwick, 2017; Massanari, 2017; Matias, 2016a; Pao, 2017).

Online Communities

Although the development of the networked technologies we take for granted today have their roots in governmental and military development (Naughton, 2000), the ways we engage with them and the understanding of community that is ubiquitous to that understanding are rooted in how these technologies are able to bring together individuals. In 1972, Stewart Brand wrote an article for *Rolling Stone* about a group of computer science students and the networked, multi-player game they had created using university computer technology – *SPACEWAR*.[50] The article centers around the game and the tournament-style championships, but it really has two main points: the human commitment and interactions which drove the development of a social and interactive technology from one which was largely viewed as static and purely utilitarian; and highlighting the repurposing of military technology and infrastructure for play through a kind of communal culture of commitment and dedication to a common goal. The developers of this early alternative use of computers are cast in the article as infinitely committed to their project, often sleeping in their labs, and engaging in multi-day development sessions without leaving, bathing, or eating much beyond vending machine fare. Their work is not just about the computers or the game, but about the community of support and mutual interest that they develop through that work; a kind of utopic communal ideology that fit well with the hippie culture in California in

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[50] (Brand, 1972) - Spacewar: Fanatic life and symbolic death among the computer bums – *Rolling Stone, 7*, p. 50-58.

the early 1970s, and set a template for the kind of utopic work-is-play-is-fun atmosphere that encourages total commitment of employees to the company in many tech companies today.

Although the culture of sharing in development which was present in those early days of networked computing have faded somewhat, the perceptual nature of computer technologies as progenitors of community has remained. Early public adopters of the web often did so because they were looking for information and the support of others who shared their interests. They were able to find and interact with others who shared their interests from many places in the world, and expand personal networks and communities from small local numbers to larger groups that included geographically distributed members. Howard Rheingold (1993) discusses these ideas in detail in his work *The Virtual Community*. Rheingold explores the ways that the development of these technologies has led directly to the ability, and desire, to build community in what he calls the "electronic frontier." He explains that "the essential elements of what became the Net were created by people who believed in, wanted, and therefore invented ways of using computers to amplify human thinking and communication" (p. 66), and as far back as early development within the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) labs in the late 1970s, the groundwork was being laid for interpersonal communication in parallel with the military applications under development for networked computing.

Early adopters like Rheingold built communities through the means afforded to them by the technologies of the time. Rheingold's involvement in the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) community, is paralleled by the community involvement and development experienced by the authors and participants of other early net studies of MUDs, MOOs, USEnet, and other networked communities (Boese, 1998; Cherny, 1994; Hakken, 2002; Kendall, 1998; A. N. Markham, 1998; L. D. Roberts & Parks, 1999; A. R. Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995, 1996; Zdenek, 1999). Largely built around Bulletin Board System (BBS)[51] infrastructure, these communities operated with a pseudo-independence from the World Wide Web of the 1990s; strikingly different from how we understand our networked interactions and on-line activities today in a world of Web 2.0.

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[51] A BBS is essentially a computer server that allows users to connect to the system using their own computer as a kind of terminal. Once logged in, the user can perform tasks like downloading or uploading data, reading news and posts, and exchanging messages with other users through public message boards, and sometimes via direct chatting. Original BBS systems were computers set up by enthusiasts which worked with modems in people's homes (circa 1978) to create a computer-assisted communication and information sharing network (Goodwin & Schwarz, 1993).

Online Communities as Leisure Spaces

Arguably, for anyone considered a millennial or younger what I am about to present is moot, as the digitally mediated nature of their work, social, and leisure realities is a fact of (rather than a factor in-addition to) life. However, the extant conversations about the nature of digital leisure merit at least some discussion here as they affect the ways we see and work with social and engaged media like reddit. Individuals who come together in online communities do so for the same reasons as they come together in any other community insofar as experiencing, producing, and consuming leisure. Authors like Arora (2014), Spracklen (2015), and Sintas, de Francisco, and Álvarez (2015; 2016) have explored the nature of leisure as we move into the digital age, and laid out extensive arguments about how we might best conceptualize leisure moving forward. Although there are critiques of the class, access, and permeability implications of interactive and leisure spaces moving to digitally mediated spaces (see Selwyn, 2003), these are dwarfed by the compelling work which situates them as ideal sites of leisure growth and participation. Each of the authors cited above (save for Selwyn) lay out arguments not only for a place for the digital in our conceptualization of leisure, but also for the idea that digital leisure is not so far removed from leisure as we have traditionally understood it. Arora (2011) provides the useful metaphor of understanding digital leisure spaces much as we have public parks as leisure spaces, with the same types of gatekeepers, access issues, preferred activities, and administrative issues present in both areas. For Arora, this is an effective way of demonstrating that these areas, while physically quite different, are both spaces for leisure participation, and by doing so, demonstrating that digital social activity is leisure. When we are engaged with our online communities in "virtual dungeons, pubs, cyber cafes, chat rooms, [and] home pages" (Arora, 2011, p. 114), we are engaged in the same kinds of deep leisure practices which take place in real-life pubs, cafes, rooms, homes, and even dungeons.

More recent work has taken up theorization of digital leisure as community, and applied community theory to strengthen the connections made by Arora. Ayer and McCarville (2020), as well as Nimrod (2016), Lizzo and Liechty (2020), and Orton-Johnson (2014) have applied community theory to online leisure interest groups as a way to help contextualize the types of interpersonal interactions and personal development that individuals gain from online leisure groups. Robinson and Holt (2020) as well as Henderson and Spracklen (2018) explore broader online social phenomena (twitch.tv and music festivals/online culture respectively), and

construct arguments situating these online settings as important community spaces for participants and spectators to come together in unique iterations of community that are only possible online. Valtchanov and colleagues (Valtchanov et al., 2014, 2016; Valtchanov & Parry, 2017) have explored how online social communities can serve as social support spaces for adolescents as well as mothers. Thompson (2019) and Orel (2019) have explored the hybridized communities of digital nomads, whose leisure and work lives are always intertwined, and both complicated and facilitated by digitality. Together these works demonstrate a growing, but still small, body of literature that addresses digital leisure community and its importance.

Summary

My theoretical choices for this dissertation are purposeful and seek to explore certain themes and discourses from certain perspectives. Grounded in feminist theory that centres sex/gender systems, power, inequity, and social justice, this research explores masculinities theory, leisure in digital spaces, and theories of digitally mediated lives to explore and explicate discourses of masculinity and power in reddit men's rights communities.

Technofeminism, while challenged for its Whiteness and Westernism (DeCook, 2020), provides a way to examine technologies, and the relationships of people and power to those technologies. It acknowledges their problematic social constructions, but leaves open the possibility of technologies as emancipatory tools. Technofeminist theory reflects the gendered structures that effect technologies and social context, and the processes by which technology is gendered and technology genders. Relative to reddit, the combined focus of gender and technologies centered by technofeminism provides a way to think about the interplay that the technologies of reddit (e.g., software design, community-linked content filtering) have with user experience. How, in communities of men like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, users might leverage or otherwise benefit from these socio-cultural and technological structures.

Masculinities theories provide another important layer to discussions about gender and power relationships, and are deeply important when discussing digital and technologically mediated spaces. Framed by man-washed histories of computing development and a (false) masculinization of the internet, how men see, contextualize, and frame norms of masculinity and 'masculine' behaviour are important elements of the social role of technologies, who can access them, and who gets to make the rules. These understandings of masculinity and power are

interwoven into political and economic decision-making, and the integration of hybridity, geekdom, and technologies into representative and hegemonic concepts of masculinity are essential to understanding the varying ways that masculinity and power are discussed and represented in groups like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill.

Changing concepts of masculinity do not operate in isolation or individually, and the technologically mediated community spaces of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are essential for collective understandings to develop and take hold. The community aspects of online interaction (the ways that individuals can come together over geographical distance, or connections between individuals from very small niche interest groups, for example) are imbricated with the technological elements that allow them to occur. Not only the software and platforms that frame, control, and mediate the interactions between users, but the hardware and existing socio-cultural expectations have deep effects (and affects) on the interactions of online communities. This is true and essential for communities on reddit, when peer-to-peer interactions are controlled in significant and important ways via the design of the software, the way that posts are sorted, what is included and excluded from view, and the ways that users and communities are limited or banned. Understanding the complexities of these interactions and, for example, the challenges that come with products open to diverse users that are designed by small, insular, and homogenous groups (Benjamin, 2019; Pao, 2017) becomes and important way to see online research spaces. The integration of feminist theory, masculinities theories, and theories of technologies and communities, provide an integrated way to explore the discourses of masculinity in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. While this exploration may exclude other ways of knowing (e.g., Actor-Network Theory, large corpus/big data analysis), it provides important theoretical and research perspective on these reddit communities.

4 : Methodology

The research in this dissertation explores the content, conversations, and discourses that sustain two sub-communities on the website reddit.com, and uses digital ethnographic methods to ask: What discourses of masculinity are embedded in the reddit manosphere spaces of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, how do they compare, and how are these discourses disseminated and monitored to maintain collective group ideologies? and, What role might reddit play, through /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, in connecting manosphere communities, and pushing users toward more radical viewpoints about gender and power? It also asks about the process of doing research in this way: What indicators or guideposts would have been useful as a novice digital qualitative researcher to help me better plan, develop, conduct, and theorise my digital ethnographic research?

The previous chapters gave a thorough description of the study area, and reviewed the relevant theory, including masculinities, feminist, and digitally mediated communications theories. This chapter will expand on the methodology of the project and methods used. The first half of the chapter explores the methodological scaffolding used in the development and implementation of my dissertation research, and will describe the ethnographic approaches used, explore the context of on-line listening safety, site selection, and ethics. The second half will describe artifact generation and analysis through image capture and review, and discuss trustworthiness and representation.

Methodological Scaffolding

Ethnography

Growing from its roots in cultural anthropology, the practices of ethnography and ethnographic research have expanded into diverse fields and contexts. At its base, ethnography is "the study of the culture of a group, usually as that culture is revealed, again, through the course of ongoing events" (Preissle & Grant, 2004), and draws its foundational significance from the deep cultural immersions undertaken by anthropologists in "primitive" cultures, especially through the 20th century (Hine, 2000; Preissle & Grant, 2004; Wolcott, 2008). Wolcott (2008) describes how during a meeting of leading anthropologists in 1909, a standardized definition of ethnography was established: "the term for descriptive accounts of non-literate peoples" (p.11). Since then, ethnography has proliferated and developed in a variety of ways, and ethnographers have

encountered a great number of changes of context and development. No longer is ethnography solely the purview of anthropologists with the time and capital to travel and live in 'far-off' cultures, nor does it maintain (at least in some areas) the racist, colonialist, and Westernized prejudices that inform these traditional definitions. Today, ethnography is used in all kinds of cultural situations and milieu, and with the proliferation of post-structuralist thought and theory, the formats of ethnography have also expanded widely. Researchers have done ethnography within their own communities (van Hulst, 2008), with cultures different from their own but close to home (Gittelsohn et al., 1996), of sport clubs (Macphail, 2004), fan groups (Monaco, 2010), established cultural settings (Berbary & Johnson, 2012), game studios (Whitson, 2020), and among marginalized populations as they navigate simultaneous cultural demands of dominant and non-dominant spaces (C. W. Johnson, 2008). Using ethnographic methods, and subsequently allowing for the expansion of traditional notions of ethnography, we have seen the development of ethnographic sub-genres including autoethnography, where the researcher examines the development and involvement of self within the cultural milieu (R. Fox, 2014), and duoethnography, where researchers conduct simultaneous and referential versions of autoethnography to provide a deeper and respondent reflexive ethnographic analysis of cultural spaces (Spencer & Paisley, 2013).

Most significant for the purposes of this research is the move of ethnographic practice to digital spaces, and a focus on the lives and cultural contexts of people and communities in digitally mediated environments. Early digital communities and landscapes were positioned as new and different cultural contexts, which could be utopias for the development of new social and cultural viewpoints (Danet, 1998), and/or hedonistic locations where users could engage safely with cultural taboos (Renninger, 2015). Digitally mediated communication allows individuals separated by geographical distance, cultural landscapes, languages, socio-economic strati, and cultural histories, to connect and build community related to specific issues or subjects (Amichai-Hamburger, 2013; Rheingold, 1993). It allows for the dissemination of information and content at a speed and breadth that is unrivaled in history, dwarfing even the world-changing revolutionary invention of the printing press (Goldin & Kutarna, 2016). It seems only logical, then, that the methodological practice of ethnography would move into digital spaces as soon as it was clear that communities were forming, and individuals were engaged with building cultures online.

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Curiously, ethnographies of the digital have been criticized by some anthropologists as a new incarnation of what Wolcott (2008) called "armchair ethnography," a pejorative term used to describe early ethnographic works which relied not on extensive fieldwork, but on a variety of secondary data sources. Ethnographies of the digital take place largely from the armchair (or computer chair, or even couch in many cases), and perhaps share this with their previous armchair counterparts. However, I would argue this is where the similarities end. In digital ethnography the researcher is having interactions (synchronous or asynchronous) with, and observations of, those who are being studied or learned from. Those interactions and observations are mediated through technologies, but are direct and specific, rather than mediated through secondary sources as in Wolcott's pejorative. By engaging with these online communities and individuals, the computer chair becomes part of the field site, and dissolves the artificial physical (and sometimes financial[52]) barriers that require movement or travel to explore community and culture.

Ethnographies of the digital are focused on those individuals and communities that engage via digital communication platforms. Although these platforms have included locations like IRC,[53] as well as MUDs,[54] contemporary ethnographies of the digital are focused on communication and community almost exclusively through the web. The diversity of communications and interactions mediated through internet channels is astounding, and this has generated a wide array of methodological approaches. These approaches are simultaneously similar and different from one another, and what is present in my design draws from some of these areas to produce digital ethnographic work unique to these settings and contexts.

Ethnographies of the digital are also a methodological approach that combine well with technofeminist theory. Technofeminism, as it sees both the great potential and great problems with digital spaces, looks to explore those digital spaces in ways which embody the users and render the individual experience to better understand socio-cultural and technological experiences. In Judy Wajcman's work on the development of technofeminist theory, she suggests ethnographic approaches as ways of actualising theory into research and analytic practice

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[52] Although use of the internet as a field site can preclude research travel and long-term stays in other communities as in traditional ethnographies, it is not without financial commitment, as we must have devices, software, website and internet access to conduct research, all of which have financial costs associated with them.
[53] Internet Relay Chat
[54] Multi-user Dungeons

(Wajcman, 2004). Given Wajcman's enthusiasm, it is unsurprising that much of the early literature on users and user experience online (covered previously, and more thoroughly in the following section) was ethnographic in nature, as has been subsequent development in socio-cultural research in this area, especially feminist research (Almjeld & Blair, 2012; Hauman, 2013; Thaler, 2014).

Early Ethnography of the Internet

Although the denizens of early online communities are often lauded as early adopters and those with visions into the future, the communities and cultural spaces they were creating were very much developmental, in flux, and contingent. They relied on close attention, participation, and maintenance of roles, rules, and cultural constructs. The participants of a given MUD, for example, needed to be willing to engage with and maintain the rules of the space, but also the fantasy context which created the world of these interactions. It was this bounded fantasy which allowed the players to explore beyond the restrictive personal identities they felt bound to in the real world, and play with race, gender, ability, and presentation (Kendall, 1998, 2002). Not coincidentally, these are the ideas that made these communities so interesting for some ethnographers.

The work of early ethnographers of the digital was twofold. The first was simply the exploration and description of the ways and means of being participants in digital communities. In the early 1990s, this type of digital citizenship was still very new and different from what was understood as traditional or correct social engagement, and authors like Howard Rheingold (1993) set out to describe and normalize user participation. Rheingold established for his readers that online communities had norms, rules of conduct, social structures, and that they were not so different from those social and cultural relations found in more 'traditional' (read: in-person) social exchanges. Later work in the nascent digital age focused more directly on the explorative and emancipatory potential of digitally mediated social interaction that was available online (Bruckman, 1996; Kendall, 1998; Turkle, 1984, 1995, 1996). As digital interaction and communication became more mainstream, digital ethnographic work continued to expand alongside it, and differentiate itself from traditional ethnography in more specific ways. The following sub-sections explore important thinkers and phases of development, how ethnography was used to explore developing cultural spaces, and the state of digitally mediated ethnography today.

Rheingold

Howard Rheingold's (1993) book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier* is heavily cited for its very early description of a participant's life and the living location of a community in the networked spaces of computers and among individuals. The book is simultaneously a rich description of the lives and types of activities that users engaged with through their networked services in the later 1980s and early 1990s, but also gives deep explanations of the materials, developments, and technological innovations that contributed to the ways individuals experienced networked culture at the time. Rheingold was certainly not the first person to write about the social role of computers in the lives of the users. Sherry Turkle's *The Second Self* (1984) and her other writing on women in computing (1988) predate Rheingold by several years, and at the same time as Rheingold's writing, Alluquère Rosanne Stone (1995) and Micheal Heim (1993) were using Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984/2000) to theorise on the ontological and philosophical implications of co-constructed human/computer realities. But Rheingold gives us a deep exploration (the book is 325 pages) of the "electronic frontier" as a place of community and interaction.

Although Rheingold might not position this work as ethnography (the term does not appear in the book), it does meet many of ethnography's defining features. Rheingold takes great care in describing the nature of the social and cultural interactions that take place in the networked spaces. Beginning from what is required to engage, he describes in detail the work of finding, entering, and becoming a member of the digital community. He discusses at length the historical development of the technological and sociological necessities required for the establishment and proliferation of networked community. He includes a deep exploration of how visions of a networked world and projections of the future capabilities of computers allowed the groundwork to be laid for our modern internet - when computers were building-sized and carried the whopping computing power of an early graphing calculator (or less). The visions of early computing luminaries, explained Rheingold, extended beyond the technological development, and "invented ways of using computers to amplify human thinking and communication…and provide it to as many people as possible, at the lowest possible cost" (p. 66).

Rheingold tells us about the status of the net and computer mediated communication as he sees them in 1993. He is, himself, a user of the technologies and community spaces that he describes, and explains on the very first page the hundreds of hours that he has spent occupying

the family phone line and engaging with other users. The historical and contextual information provided on digital spaces is so necessary in this early work because the landscape was so new. The current suite of email protocols that allow for broad accessibility to email only became standard after 1995. It is clear, even by the title of the book, that Rheingold saw the electronic universe of computer mediated communication as a new and exciting space for the development of relationships and the creation of other cultural spaces. Those who followed Rheingold to work on internet communities would use his work as both inspiration and a platform for launching their own.

Stone

Not long after Rheingold's work on the social and technological development of early online community, Alluquère Rosanna Stone (1995) published *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* about the effects of computers and interactivity on social communications, centering online spaces and gender identity. Stone's work is foundational in discussions about technology and gender, as well as the study of online community and communication, and was essential for the discussions about gender and place in online spaces that would follow from authors like Kendall (1998) and Zdenek (1999), among many others. Conceptualising gender and personae as existing in multiple and intersecting ways, Stone positioned virtual worlds as locations of permissible multiplicity and play. Unlike some contemporary online social contexts (e.g., Facebook) that seek to create a singular, identifiable 'person' (including the visual through photos, the textual through written words, and the geophysical through identified locations of home and business), Stone argued that online social spaces had the capacity to, and afforded people a space to, exercise their natural inclination to play with gender (among other elements of self). This ability gave gender (in particular) a liminality in online identity, creating alternate personae for those that played with it. Because the influence of technologies and technologically mediated identities are inescapable in a post-mechanical age, Stone argues, the virtual and physical, biology and technology, become permeable and these connections, overlaps, and multiplicities in identity, "once achieved, cannot be repudiated; it changes vision forever" (p. 183). When Stone wrote about the permeability and

multiplicity of identity in 1995, they were foreshadowing the spectrum of identity-fashioning[55] now available online, and their assertions have only become more salient over 25 years later.

In addition to their important work on gender, multiplicity, liminality, and technology, Stone's book considers how intellectual holdovers from the mechanical age allow us to mischaracterise computers as merely tools. This deeply utilitarian approach to technologies and their influences is rooted in a mechanical age need for control over invention or creation as a product of, rather than an extension of, the 'person.' Stone considered this approach to be outmoded and lacking understanding about the true nature of technological influence on the physical and social lives of users and those around them. Rather than a product without agency or an integral role in the actions and sociality of the person, Stone preferred considering technologies as a kind of technological prosthesis, or an integrated, extensible part of the person that was essential to their techno-sociality – a kind of refraction on Haraway's (1990) cyborg. Technologies, Stone writes, are "arenas of social experience" that along with creating space for multiple and intermingled personas, "are parts of ourselves."

> As with all powerful discourses, their very existence shapes us. Since in a deep sense they are languages, it's hard to see what they do, because what they do is to structure seeing. They act on the systems – social, cultural, neurological – by which we make meaning. Their implicit messages change us. (p. 167-168)

The technologies and the people as they interact, rather than forming a merely transactional relationship, become co-mingled and co-constructed. So, while the user may log into reddit to seek out breaking news or share information, the social and cultural systems that help them decide what news is important are necessarily influenced by the way content is organized and presented by reddit's sorting mechanisms, and the where and how they share information is influenced by the neurological feedback they receive via reddit's feedback mechanisms (e.g., Karma, etc.). Reddit and the user, then, are not mutually exclusive actors, but rather co-constructed entities.

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[55] I understand the spectrum of online identity-fashioning as the variety of ways that we can build and/or hide personal identities online from the (presumed) singular identities that occur on Facebook to the quasi-anonymity of reddit accounts, and the anonymous postings on forums like 4chan and 8chan.

Gender, Exploration, and MUDs

Around the same time as Stone and Rheingold were producing their work, several researchers took up ethnographic, or at least cultural exploratory, work on the communities and communications occurring in networked environments and early networked computers. Much of this research looked to the networked spaces as free and open, where some of the utopic projections of new society with changed rules could take root; particularly for gendered representations of self and the freedoms that text-based embodiment permitted.

Sherry Turkle (1995, 1996) is the most often cited of these writers, and her work in the mid-nineties helped to position networked interactions online as a unique area of inquiry, worthy of exploration because of the deep and rich social and cultural interactions taking place there. Turkle's work delves deeply into concepts that remain part of the research discussion on internet-based social environments today, including: the questioned divide between real and virtual selves; embodiment within our digital avatars; issues of class and access to digital spaces; and even how and whether we can conceptualize participation in digital worlds as leisure time when the concept of leisure is contested by the very nature of what we do while online. Turkle also provides extensive reflection on the roles that gender plays (or does not play) on the when, where, and how of participation in the new social landscape of digitality. Her ethnographic work in the 1990s draws important ties to work she and others were doing in the 1980s reflecting on the interactions between women, computers, and technology more generally (Turkle, 1984, 1988). Turkle makes links between the gendered and masculinized nature of the computer as an object, and the networked communication of internet interaction. These links become a way to frame the duality of living with the fears of a woman's body in a location that is simultaneously an escape and a place where that vulnerability is re-imagined in other ways. Although the physical body cannot be violated or co-opted as it can in the physical world, vulnerability emerges to other types of violence in the digital context.

Turkle's work on gender and early internet social spaces is complemented by the research of other scholars who engaged with and/or troubled the utopic early visions for gender and networked life. Recalling early work on the potential for electronic communication to be more open and equitable (Graddol & Swann, 1989), and a location for the formation of new norms (Ferrara et al., 1991; Wilkins, 1991), Lynn Cherny (1994) discusses how men and women (as they identify for the purposes of the study) use different speech patterns, and utilize textual

representations of physical acts in different ways. For Cherny, most important among these are the ways in which the intimacy associated with physical acts, even as they are typed and represented through synchronous chat, can be easily co-opted and must be policed. "It seems plain" she says, "that cyberspace is not free of abusive or hierarchical behaviour" (Cherny, 1994, p. 113). Stone's (1995) work, as discussed in the previous section, was significant for helping to theorise the multiplicity and malleability of identity and gender online. Later in the 1990s, Roberts and Parks (1999), and Zdenek (1999) demonstrated theorisation of gender through the textual interactions of networked communications, especially through MUDs. Zdenek (1999) provides a nuanced analysis of chat bots, positing that watching chat bots interacting with real, gendered people might give us insight into how men and women interact online. Perhaps ahead of the curve in projecting how the programming and algorithms of these mediated interactions both affect and predict human actions, Zdenek's observations and subsequent linguistic and social theorization demonstrate effective uses of research and theory in what is still a new frontier of online interactions. Roberts and Parks (1999) were interested in the idea of gender switching in these locations. Relying on Rodino's (1997) idea that virtual environments are important locations of challenging gender binary, Roberts and Parks explore the phenomenon through self-reported informants. Although conceptually interesting, this work suffers from the difficulties researchers face when trying to apply offline research techniques in systematic ways to networked communication. Important information about participants, as well as the ability to vet respondents in person is lost in this approach, and researchers must ask themselves if this is a problem or not.

Important in these examples, whether they were positioned as ethnographic studies or not, is the way they have tackled the observational requirements and considerations of researching networked communications. While using gender as their primary area of focus, each also struggles with ways of generating 'legitimate' data (at the time) while working with online communities. In 1996 Sherry Turkle made the argument that when we evaluate data collected online "we don't have to reject life on the screen," as it forms a part of the experiences and cultural setting of the individual, "but we don't have to treat it as an alternative life either" (p. 57), as it is as significant and important to the individual as their in-person interactions.

Cyborgs, Cyberspace, and the Cultures of Online Nativism

Where the authors in the previous section studied online community and individual representation, other authors have focused more specifically on the use and development of ethnography online. Their work serves as the foundation for the way that researchers approach conducting ethnographic work in a technologically mediated and networked world. These texts, particularly those from the late 1990s and early 2000s focus on method and the idea of moving ethnography into digital spaces, while simultaneously doing their best to establish the digital world as a realistic and reasonable area of research. Hine's (2000) "Virtual Objects of Ethnography," or Markham's (1998) "Going Online" do the work of calling for a reflexive consciousness about ethnographic method as these methods are transformed into digital versions under development. Complementing these books are others which seek to situate ethnography in the digital landscape, or rather to situate the digital as a functional area of ethnographic inquiry. Works by Miller and Slater (2000), and Hakken (2002), among others, broaden and strengthen the argument for online ethnographic practice, using complex and deep ethnographies as a way of teaching, encouraging, and exemplifying how this work might be used.[56] These works set the stage for deeper consideration of ethnography as an online practice - Pink et al.'s (2016) and Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) methodological texts (covered in detail below), Hjorth, Horst, Galloway, and Bell's (2017) edited collection on the subject, as well as deep philosophical considerations like Gabriella Coleman's (2010, 2011) work. The later developments noted here are often an examination of the digital spaces themselves as much as the human interactions which take place there.

These works, beyond pioneering ethnographic practice in a changing digital landscape, helped establish tools and starting points for the ways that we might do ethnography while the setting is in flux. Likely the most important contributions of early ethnographies of the digital were to establish that although the pace of change is rapid, they are important and viable locations for ethnographic research with significant social impacts.

Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography, like ethnography, is a broad-spectrum term for a variety of approaches to social research in digitally mediated environments. I believe that Pink et al.'s *Digital*

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[56] Miller and Slater's work on Trinidadian uptake of digital communications technologies is an excellent example.

Ethnography: Principles and Practice (2016) does a good job of providing foundational elements about digital ethnographic approaches, without being prescriptive about how researchers should undertake their work. The book, among other goals, aims to explain "the possibilities of digital ethnography for both researching and redefining central concepts in social and cultural research" (p. 2). Using previous ethnographic work in digital environments to contextualize the nature of ethnography in digital landscapes, Pink and colleagues "suggest ways of accounting for the digital as part of our worlds that are both theoretical and practical and that offer coherent frameworks through which to do ethnography across specific sites and questions" (p. 7). Using their own digital ethnographic explorations, the authors propose five principles for the use of digital ethnography. These principles serve more as guides than hard and fast rules, and are presented in a way that allows those implementing this version of digital ethnography to use them in a variety of ways.

The first of Pink et al.'s principles is multiplicity, meaning that there are multiple ways to engage with the digital. For example, they explain that to be able to engage in any type of digital activity, you require a reliable power source. This source of power is largely dependent on the infrastructure in place to produce and distribute that power, and therefore one can engage with the digital and the elements of the digital world through examination of the infrastructural components that make that world possible. Mirroring the work of Parks (2015) around the importance of infrastructure to our digital experiences and our lack of recognition of these elements and their importance, Pink et al. encourage an openness to a variety of pathways to examining the digital. The items that we must hold, use, or kick[57] to partake in digital interactions are as important as the interactions themselves.

Pink et al.'s second principle is focused on de-centering the digital in digital ethnography. Not just acknowledging that the media studied must be addressed in their multiplicity, this principle suggests that "the ways in which media are inseparable from the other activities, technologies, materialities and feelings through which they are used, experienced and operate" (p. 9). To study only the media, they say, would pay too little attention to the relations and environments that help to create them. This principle is especially true for the authors when digital ethnography is focused on localities above practices, things, or social relationship. In this

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[57] This choice of words calls back to the important work of Parks (2015) on the physical components of digital lives.

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context, the interpersonal interactions are used as a way to experience and analyse the locality in which they take place, physical or digital, what Pink et al call the "inhabited place" (p. 125), or what Doreen Massey might call an "event" or "constellation of processes" (Massey, 2005, p. 141). These concepts contribute to the idea that the tangible thing[58] of the digital communication (the visual representation of the coded transmission) is only a small part of what is important about the larger context of digital ethnography.

Third for Pink et al., is that digital ethnography must be an open event, best understood as "flexible research design" (p. 11). This type of work, they explain, must be able to adapt to the needs of the shareholders, in that sometimes digital ethnography is done in partnership with non-academic entities or individuals, and the practice must be limber enough to meet the needs of all the parties involved. The collaborative nature of this ethnography is not unique to digital spaces, and indeed, Pink et al. argue that there is a significant collaborative component to all ethnography given the nature of this type of research, but that the digital forms of collaboration inherent in digital ethnography "invite different ways of co-producing knowledge with research partners and participants" (p. 12).

Fourth, the digital ethnographic process must also be a reflexive process. Not unlike other ethnographic practices which must be reflexive of the ways that we contribute and produce the knowledges of our work, in digital ethnography we must be conscious of these elements along with our personal concomitant involvement with the digital. Pink et al. explain that "our relationships with the digital are pivotal to the specific ways of knowing and being that we will encounter in the course of our research practice" (p. 13). Our personal reflections on these matters, along with the reflexive nature of our practice related to environment and social contributors to our research sites, permit us to conceptualize differently around the roles of digital elements or localities in the cultural settings we are exploring (Pink et al., 2016, p. 124).

Last, Pink and colleagues position digital ethnography as unorthodox in the ways that it is presented and disseminated. Although they admit that it is largely tied to the traditional words-

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[58] With deference to the concept that a digital interaction has long been considered an intangible, since we cannot hold that interaction in our hands in the way that we could paper, and that, like oral history, this perceived intangibility has rendered digital communication as lesser-than because of the where and how that it exists. This speaks, in some ways, to Gullion's (2018) discussion on the primacy of text, but with specific reference to printed text over digital.

on-the-page presentations of journal articles and books (their idea is, after all, presented in book format), they argue that digital ethnography is properly positioned to be able to present its data and findings in ways that push against the traditional notions of where and how research projects are produced. Although for more traditionally minded projects where the work is textual, the logical presentation is textual, for those ethnographers working with video and images, other presentation formats might be preferred. Pink and colleagues give some examples of where this has been difficult for these researchers in the past, although with the fast-paced development in the ways we can create and access content, this impediment has the potential to be reduced. Their argument, then, is that digital ethnography is well positioned for those who wish to push research representation in new directions, since the content and research products might engage with media formats and representations which are unorthodox for researchers, although well established outside of academia

Where Pink et al.'s *Digital Ethnography* provides a set of principles, Boellstorff and colleagues' (2012) *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A handbook of method* provides a process-oriented approach to ethnography in digital landscapes. The book gives context and contrast between 'traditional' ethnography and ethnography of virtual worlds, and provides useful (although sometimes dated) considerations around data collection, ethics, analysis, and knowledge production. Framed through the research experiences of the four authors, the book provides practical suggestions for the virtual ethnographer, and challenges them to consider every aspect of their proposed project.

There are parallels between these books that are important to mention, including the distributed nature of the field site and participant identities when doing digital/virtual ethnographic research. Pink et al. remind the reader that it is important to understand that digital ethnographies are not exclusively digital in that research sites/communities exist across digital platforms, as well as in the physical world. Boellstorff et al. similarly contend that field sites should be "understood as an assemblage of actors, places, practices, and artifacts that can be physical, virtual, or a combination of both" (p. 60). Both remind the reader that regardless of whether they consider their field site to extend into the physical world, that relations to the physical world must be contended with in all parts of the research – the geographies (e.g., socio-cultural expectations, time zones, language, access, etc.) of usership and community identity are always at play.

A Note on Netnography

Perhaps the most often cited (at least in leisure studies) approach to digital ethnography is Kozinets' netnography, described in *Netnography: Redefined* (2015). Developed as Kozinets worked at doing ethnography on the early internet, netnography is a way of looking at research online and the individuals who inhabit online spaces in a way that is specific to the digital landscape. Rooted in anthropological understandings of ethnography, netnography is "specific sets of research positions and accompanying practices embedded in historical trajectories, webs of theoretical constructs, and networks of scholarship and citation" (Kozinets, 2015, p. 2), situated primarily online. Data gathering is done through a variety of online platforms and areas and allows the researchers to focus "primarily on the artifactual and communicative realities of online social exchange" (p. 54). Although netnographic work can be confined to one area, site, or topic, the concept of field site in this type of research is more fluid than it can be with traditionally 'fleshy' ethnography. Kozinets explains this by saying:

> Netnography does not need to be focused on a particular website or online location. However, it certainly can be. It need not correspond to a particular location, groups of persons, or even topic that exists discretely in sort of fully materialized manifestation in the physical world, such as San Antonio, Texas, first-time mothers, or amateur woodworking. Rather, netnography's topic matter is specific communications. It just so happens that these specific communications manifest as bits of change collected on various circuits, caught and shared through electrochemical metal configurations. (p. 118)

The position presented here, explained Kozinets, allows for different kinds of explorations than might be available when applying traditional ethnographic practice to online spaces, and allows for the exploration and discovery of 'relevant narrative themes' (p. 119) across a variety of sites and experiences online. Analysis in netnography is therefore "positioned somewhere between the vast searchlights of big data analysis and the close readings of discourse analysis" (Kozinets, 2015, p. 4), allowing for broader phenomenological understandings without the net-casting of big data analysis, and nuanced understandings of discrete phenomena which maintain some generalizability.

Although netnography has been used extensively, it is not without methodological difficulty. Although Kozinets is liberal with the way that the methodology can be applied throughout the book,[59] there are some significant sticking points if one is interested in pursuing research in contentious areas like those presented here. Kozinets seems happy to vacillate between rules and suggestions around data gathering,[60] but is unwavering in his assertion that netnographic work must be open, direct, and honest with those who are being observed. Kozinets all but commands that the researcher have a research website which describes the type of work being done, the findings as they are unfolding, and a full bio of the researcher so that potential participants and those being observed can both learn about the researcher and check-up on the work they are doing. Kozinets' approach completely disregards the real and present dangers that exist for researchers when they do any kind of work on other people in the age of the internet and social networked communications, and greatly underestimates how his approach to internet research might endanger the researcher. Both the pressing need to openly identify as a researcher, as well as publicise the research in a website while it is ongoing would only exacerbate the types of dangers to the researcher covered in the safety and security section later in this chapter.

The ignorance of the complicating factors (like the possibility that the researcher may face reprisal for their research) highlights some of the implications of researcher positionality in online ethnographic research. Kozinets, as a tenured, funded, White, male researcher at a major university in Canada who does not study contentious communities, simply may not have had to deal with these types of complications in his research, and therefore may never have been forced to consider them. The rigidity presented in Kozinets' method does not translate well to work with contentious or potentially dangerous communities, and has the potential to greatly increase the risks to researchers undertaking this kind of work. So, although Kozinets' approach to internet research has value, and has positioned the development of digital ethnographic methods as we move deeper into the digital age, it is not a viable approach for all research.

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[59] This has extended even further with the third edition of the book, *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research* (2019). This edition of the book is a pivot for Kozinets that reflects applications of netnography by other authors that did not follow the rigid structure that he had established in previous editions.
[60] Kozinets' concept of alteration - he states that research practices and means of obtaining that data must be changed to properly reflect the location and specialized contexts of that area (YouTube data must be collected by someone with some video literacy), without discussing the immense task of learning proper research methods across technological platforms, or the inherent challenges of this type of research.

The texts covered above are essential reading for those engaging with digital ethnography, covering the practical and theoretical ends of a spectrum of consideration when engaging with this methodological approach. Other writing on digital ethnography and its intricacies have also added important ways of thinking. Abidin and de Seta (2020), citing Gatson (2012), discuss how the ethical frameworks, structures of the research projects, and the actual media that are used for study in digital ethnography are constantly in the making. They are informed by institutional and relational protocols, research expectations and deliverables, and "contextual, situated understandings of concepts like privacy or fair use" (Abidin & de Seta, 2020, p. 10). Baym (2009) wrote about the importance of reflexivity in the practice of digital ethnography, explaining that through researcher honesty about positionality and perspective, being consistently reflexive allows for "finding practical and defensible balancing points between opposing tensions" in epistemology, participation, and representation (p. 173). Beaulieu (2004) likewise notes that the inclusion of, and attention to, reflexivity helps to ground the research and bolster the legitimacy of digital ethnographic work.

Caliandro (2018), taking a pragmatic approach to some of the challenges of digital ethnographic work, explores how it is not always possible to consider online communities as 'classical' and privileged field sites, and that the digital ethnographer is sometimes required to move across field sites and social media environments. The work of digital ethnography can, therefore, change into a kind of mapping of social formations and spaces that require the ethnographer to employ different analytical concepts, like self-presentation as a tool, and the user as a device, and questions of what is community? and who is the public?

Duggan (2017) and de Seta (2020) provide food for thought about the overall status of digital ethnography in the context of ubiquitous computing. They discuss the dissolution of a digital physical boundary (Duggan), and the lies that practitioners of digital ethnography tell themselves (and others) about the methodological illusions they take on when doing ethnography with digital media (de Seta). These works are connected insofar as they ask relational questions about the status of ethnography as a practice and methodology in the context of digital media spaces. In de Seta's case that question is about how we might weave, fabricate, or too enthusiastically dive into participation in online spaces because it is so much easier to do so in digital media than it might have been in more 'traditional' forms of ethnography. While each of

these are problematic in specific ways, they are also deeply productive in the digital ethnographic context, and properly acknowledged and contextualized, they are "are part and parcel of doing ethnographic research on, through and about digital media" (De Seta, 2020, p. 94). Duggan, on the other hand, is asking questions about the status of 'traditional' ethnography considering the ubiquity of computing. Is it even possible, he asks, to conduct analogue ethnographic work considering that computers are everywhere and have a part to play in every aspect of our lives? As a geographer, Duggan suggests that the construction of digital ethnography as a stand-alone methodological process might reinforce a binary online/offline, virtual/real understanding that social geography has been working to dissolve for some time.

The complex relational, technological, and sociological elements that contribute to the practice of digital ethnography make it challenging to define and discuss in concise ways. Pragmatic handbooks that provide researchers with specific methods and approaches (e.g., Boellstorff et al., 2012), along with signposted approaches for methodological consideration (e.g., Pink et al., 2016) contribute differently to the ongoing discussions and development of digital ethnographic practice and its sedimentation as a methodology that "entails anxieties, challenges, concerns, dilemmas, doubts, problems, tensions and troubles" (Abidin & de Seta, 2020, p. 9).

The Silent Witness – Lurking as Listening

When considering digital ethnographic methods for my dissertation, I went through several ideas about how I might best engage with the users, communities, and content that would make up my reddit data. I thought about becoming a regular contributor, an asker of questions, an active voter, or an agitator (for more information about what this means, see the sidebar below). Each of these are important ways that some users contribute to online communities like those of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, and each come with their own considerations about what is required of the researcher, what kinds of preparations will need to be made, what kinds of precautions need to be taken, what kind of work would need to be done before the "real" research can begin (e.g., building up a user profile with content and Karma in order to be taken seriously), and what materials and technologies will best help the researcher do their work. Ultimately, I chose none of the above, and instead opted to enter the community and do my research as a listener – an observer and reader of content, a follower of links, consciously taking in the ideas and ideologies of the community.

In thinking through this approach, I considered my own use of reddit over the many years that I have been a user, and it occurred to me that the vast majority of the many, many hours I have spent on the site have been as an observer – a scroller of content and a saver of memes. I have, until the last couple of years, done very little commenting, and continue to vote sparingly even as a long-time and regular user. But I have spent hundreds (or more likely thousands) of hours on the site. Especially within men's rights spaces, my participation has always been exclusively observational, watching the content and discussion with interest but with little motivation to engage. I would have called myself a lurker, and so why not use lurking and become a kind of silent witness to the content, discussions, and processes of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill?

Discussions of lurker-users in online communities have been happening since the 1990s, and Blair Nonnecke and colleagues (Nonnecke et al., 2004; Nonnecke & Preece, 2003) explored the act of lurking and the motivations for this kind of online involvement at length. "Lurking," they said, "is a strategic activity that involves more than just reading posts" (Nonnecke & Preece, 2003, p. 110), "The activities [of lurkers] are not passive … but involve strategies for determining what to read, delete or save" (p. 122). An important part of Nonnecke and Preece's work is that nobody is in a mode of constant production in online communities, and that everyone is a lurker at some point. Kate Crawford (2009, 2011) picked up on this idea of everyone-as-lurker, explaining "lurking is the most common state for Internet users. People move between active and inactive status, spending most of their time reading the work of others, and sometimes emerging when a discussion moves into their areas of interest" (Crawford, 2011, pp. 63–64). The work of Nonnecke and colleagues and Crawford give estimates above 90% for the number of lurkers in online communities relative to 'active' participants. Lurking, regardless of the number of users who would be classified this way, carried a pejorative connotation (Pitta & Fowler, 2005; Ridings et al., 2006), or was seen only as a way for novice users (and researchers) to familiarise themselves with the online setting before becoming a "full-fledge participant (Baym, 2000; Beaulieu, 2004).

Crawford troubles the idea of the lurker as a pejorative; one that feeds the "overemphasis on posting, commenting and 'speaking up' as the only significant forms of participation" (Crawford, 2009, p. 528). "'Speaking up'" Crawford says, "has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces such as blogs, wikis, news sites and discussion lists" (p. 526)

where the "glorification of 'voice'" (Crawford, 2011, p. 65) is the only way to be a part of community. Crawford proposes a move away from the term lurking to using listening, since it lacks the pejorative connotation of the term lurking and opens the non-voiced elements of community participation to different types of consideration. "Listening" Crawford explains, "has not been given sufficient consideration as a significant practice of intimacy, connection, obligation and participation online; instead, it has often been considered as contributing little value to online communities, if not acting as an active drain on their growth" (Crawford, 2009, p. 527). She continues:

> If we reconceptualize lurking as listening, it reframes a set of behaviours once seen as vacant and empty into receptive and reciprocal practices. Moreover, as a metaphor for attending to discussions and debates online, listening more usefully captures the experience that many Internet users have. It reflects the fact that everyone moves between the states of listening and disclosing online; both are necessary, and both are forms of participation. … A consideration of listening practices allows for a more acute assessment of online engagement, and decentres the current overemphasis on posting, commenting and 'speaking up' as the only significant forms of participation. Additionally, it allows for the deep sense of connection that listening participants can feel in online spaces, rather than diminishing this form of presence. (Crawford, 2009, pp. 527–528)

At the same time as Crawford was writing about listening in Media and Communication Studies, Kate Lacey was theorising on listening in the public sphere and politics as a communicative and participatory act. In the context of public discourse, Lacey argues, "The speech act alone is static; only the presence of an active listener introduces the dynamic, the element of intersubjectivity … speaker and listener are mutually interdependent" (Lacey, 2011, p. 12). Not only are they interdependent, but the act of speaking is nothing at all without the listener to take it in; "…speech is nothing but noise in the ether; more to the point, without a listener there would be no reason, no calling, to speak" (p. 12).

Rocío Galarza Molina (2017) picks up Crawford and Lacey's works, and extends the epistemic discussion of speaking's perceived value over listening. They explain that a reliance on only what is spoken (or typed, posted, or commented) funnels understanding and knowledge in

precarious ways. "These commendations toward online deliberation and participatory cultures once more are indicative of how speaking trumps listening." Molina explains, "But this unbalance leaves us with a narrow understanding of the possibilities afforded by new technologies" (Molina, 2017, p. 112). For Crawford, Lacey, and Molina, acts of participating in online communities through 'voiced' actions are given an epistemic primacy over listening, the same kind of epistemic primacy that we afford text over other ways of knowing and communicating in the academy.[61] And while authors like those I have drawn on here have challenged this way of knowing, the research act of taking in and analysing only these 'voiced' actions is the standard in social science research.

When I chose listening for my research, I had yet to consider the epistemological implications of this move, and how it would affect the ways that I might see and interpret the empirical materials that I collected. It was a pragmatic decision that made sense; this is the way that I have always experienced the discourses within my study communities after all. The move to online listening, though, has been essential in my own theorisation about the ways that we ignore complexity in favour of existing ways of knowing – how, for example, within ethnography the use of internet-based field sites has been (and continues to be) questioned as somehow insufficient as a cultural field site (Beaulieu, 2004; De Seta, 2020).

Listening as research practice also avoids some the dangers that come along with working, researching, or doing activism online, including personal attacks and online harassment.[62] Marwick, Blackwell, and Lo (2016) describe online harassment as "the use of networked technologies to threaten, maliciously embarrass, or attack another individual. It includes behaviors that range from merely irritating to life-threatening" (p. 3). This type of harassment can take many forms, including the publishing of personal information online, repeated threats of violence to the person, or the person's family, or dissemination of falsified information about the person, among others (Douglas, 2016). Victims of harassment can have significant personal and social consequences, and researchers who have been caught unprepared and unaware of these types of violence have experienced emotional, relationship, and

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[61] For further discussion of this idea, see chapter 6 - *Application of a Digital Ethnographic Assemblage Theory-Method – the Research Technoassemblage*.
[62] This approach is independent of decisions about how to represent and present research data that might generate this kind of attack which is an additional set of ethical and safety considerations, although some of the same ideas apply in these circumstances.

professional challenges as a result (Gray et al., 2018; Levy & Johnson, 2012; Marwick et al., 2016). There is also a history of this type of online harassment, and attacks, against researchers who interrogate issues of gender, misogyny, and male supremacism in online context. #Gamergate is perhaps the best known example of this, and journalists as well as researchers have been doxed, brigaded, and threatened over coverage, commentary, and even tangentially-related research related to gender and video games (Braithwaite, 2016; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Gray et al., 2018; Ip, 2014). Doing research on ideological communities, then, carries certain risks for the researcher that need to be considered and mitigated.

The (short lived) Agitational Protocol

Through the project proposal planning of this dissertation, Corey Johnson and I developed what we called an agitation protocol that we theorized could generate a researcher-action | community-response dynamic between myself and the reddit communities I chose to study. The intention was to force the communities to engage the affirmations and defences used internally when confronted with discourses that did not align with their ideological standpoints. The idea was exciting, but also made me a little anxious in the wake of #Gamergate and other stories of researchers and others encountering backlash to their work online and offline (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Ip, 2014). I believed that I could likely manage my exposure if I was careful, and initially dismissed these concerns, but revisited them later. Jen Whitson, from a place of deep wisdom, suggested that I reconsider.

> Me: *So here is the plan. Along with data collection by capturing posts, I'm going to drop in pro-equity and clearly feminist content to see how the communities react!*
>
> Jen: 😐
>
> Me: *We are calling it an **agitational protocol**. I think I will probably get banned, but that is the best part about doing it on Reddit. I can just make a new account and keep going. I'm going to see how they react and then I can talk about it. It's great!* 😁
>
> Jen: 😐 *... I don't think that is a very good idea.*
>
> Me: 😐 *... Why not?*
>
> Jen: *Well...let me explain.*

Jen's explanation was multi-faceted and went beyond my initial thought that purposeful agitation was a way to do research that was potentially dangerous (but also manageable) for myself and my family. Although Jen conceded that agitation was likely better done by me rather than a researcher who identified as a woman, she suggested that (either way) this would likely constitute an unethical manipulation of the communities that I chose to study, and that these types of interactions were likely already occurring organically. Why bother manufacturing controversy, she asked, especially where (especially feminist) research ethos compels us to provide **all** our research subjects with the basic courtesy of being free from manipulation by the researcher?[63] She also suggested that this approach was likely to ratchet up content and vitriol from some users, combining and compounding potential safety concerns and problematic manipulation. In the end, her words of caution overshadowed my enthusiasm for danger and click-bait research findings, and I abandoned the prospect of manufactured argument.

Bounding the Site

Reddit is a deep well of content, and even when limited to only subreddits that discuss and support manosphere rhetoric, the volume of data available is far too vast to cover all of it in the type of qualitative project using ethnographic methods that I undertook.[64] For this reason, I chose two significant subreddits within the manosphere community: /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. As explained in the [Why Choose Reddit as a Study Site?](#) section, these two subreddits were selected purposefully, as they represent two different, but related, elements of manosphere thinking, touching on different aspects of anti-feminism and Western gendered traditionalisms.

While the initial context of the research was limited to the two subreddits, the way that reddit aggregates content meant that I also viewed content from other sites, including YouTube, various news sites, academic journal articles, blogs, other social media content, and personal websites. Although the posted content, as well as the origin of that content, is important to the analysis, this work did not pursue the content further than its first-tier origins when linked from reddit (e.g., the comments on a news piece or YouTube video that served as the primary source

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[63] This is a disciplinary assertion of course, since fields like psychology regularly use deception as part of their research methodologies, and (sometimes) have extensive protocols in place to mitigate any negative effects from those deceptions on research participants.

[64] Or any single research project, methodology, or approach.

for a reddit thread). While the primary content was important to properly contextualize the original posts and parent comments, my inquiry was focused on the discourses and practices of reddit, rather than the production of content which fuels these discussions and discourses.

Access

As discussed previously in this chapter, reddit is a free platform available to anyone with internet access of sufficient bandwidth to load the site. Because of this, the subreddit communities I studied are public, although some content may require a click-through stating that the user is over the age of 18.[65,66] In order to engage in content-oriented participation in the community, either through voting or posting of comments/content, the user requires only a login. Obtaining a login for reddit requires a unique email address and unique username, items that can be acquired in under five minutes and with the use of a free email service. Users can follow this process repeatedly if they want (creating new email addresses, followed by new reddit accounts), and have multiple active reddit accounts at a time (this is covered in more detail in chapter two: The Setting). For this project, I created a new login (/u/LearnStuffAboutStuff) to be able to create a curated research feed of manosphere content.

Ethics

The ethical considerations of this project were complex, since they are couched in the subjective interpretation of whether content in an internet space like reddit is public content, or not. The dilemma from the perspective of university-sanctioned research, is centered on the idea of whether the users who post on reddit have a reasonable expectation that their posts and content will be private when they post them. There are arguments for and against the expectation of privacy, and I will do my best to cover them here.

The most compelling argument for the idea that reddit users have an expectation of privacy over their content is that the site has a required login to post. Like other websites with this limitation, a user must be logged in to post, and could therefore be under the impression that

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[65] The term *public* is used here rather than, say, 'open to everyone' in that along with an internet connection that allows you to open and run the site, users and visitors require things like knowledge of the site itself, specific abilities and aptitudes, and English language ability. Without these things, you cannot access the site or the content.
[66] While it remains true that the subreddits I studied are public, the quarantine of /r/TheRedPill means that access has an additional barrier (the quarantine click-through), but since the completion of my research, reddit has implemented a requirement that to bypass the quarantine click-through and see the community content, you must now be a registered user with a verified email address, further limiting access.

their content is somehow protected or privileged by their username. Although a login is required to post, almost all content posted by users is accessible to anyone who can access reddit, login or not.[67] Different from sites that require a login to view content, reddit does not do this type of gatekeeping. The argument for assumed privacy of content I believe to be moot; the content from my study subreddits is accessible to all users.

Another argument for user privacy is that usernames provide a buffer for individuals, but still constitute a part of their personal identities, and that the posts associated with those identities have a reasonable expectation of remaining private. This is the argument used by ethics review boards that might insist on the obfuscation of usernames in the reproduction of content or reporting of research (Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2015; A. Markham, 2012). I find two issues with this assertion. The first is that all posts from a username are associated with that username, and are available through their username site,[68] and although not everyone is as open about their identity on reddit as Arnold Schwarzenegger, users are aware of this persistent connection between usernames and content. Second, but related to the first, is that when users are posting things that are embarrassing, controversial, or they would rather not associate with their main accounts, they often create throwaway accounts.[69] This is a regular practice on the site and indicates that users are acutely aware that their content will be seen, interpreted, and linked to them if enough information is available – something that full user histories can often provide.

The elements presented above make a reasonable case for the content on reddit to be seen as public and therefore useable for research without express consent from those posting the content; much as the content and posts from individual users on YouTube or other sites might be used in research. Wikipedia provides a useful analogous example for this phenomenon as contributors and editors are required to have an account and username, but this is not required to read content. Also, the content posted is open for public consumption and commentary. I argue that users have no real expectation of privacy on reddit as it relates to the content they post under

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[67] The only exception to this rule is when users create and post in private subreddits where only invited and approved members can post and read content. For the purposes of this research, no private subreddits are being accessed.
[68] See /u/GovSchwarzenegger for one example from Arnold Schwarzenegger.
[69] See /u/Throwaway for one example.

their usernames, provided the analysis of that content does not seek to expose their identities. This research did not.

With these ethical considerations in mind, I still sought ethics approval for my proposed project, as there are sometimes unforeseen effects on individuals or groups through research conducted by well-meaning or under-informed academics. Take, for example, the April 2021 banning and reverting of all patches to the Linux kernel by all @minnesota.edu emails after it was revealed that researchers from the institution (Wu & Lu, 2021) had deliberately introduced vulnerabilities into the software for their research (Lakshmanan, 2021).[70] The researchers in this case state very plainly that they "knew we could not ask the maintainers of Linux for permission, or they would be on the lookout for the hypocrite patches" (Lakshmanan, 2021, para 3). Having to make this statement should be more than enough indication that research of this nature has tangible effects on human subjects, even if the research is not directly focused on those human subjects. The research proceeded and would have likely continued if the incident were not discovered and publicised. The impact of this unethical research practice extends far beyond the Linux developer community. The nature of the vulnerabilities and their planned, clandestine insertion into the Linux codebase meant that any user who downloaded these patches would be impacted, and a huge number of software infrastructures rely on Linux operating systems (Chin, 2021), including Netflix, NASA, and the New York Stock Exchange.

In my case, the ethics approval process was primarily made up of discussions about the nature of the data I was going to collect, who (if any) gatekeepers were for this data, and the debate about whether the data were public or not. The project was approved as described here (IRB #40945 – May 16, 2019) and the research proceeded.

Interrogating feminist ethics in researching men's rights online

The feminist and masculinities studies theories I have discussed in this dissertation are rooted (at least in part for masculinities studies) within a feminist research ethos that includes acceptance of various onto-epistemological perspectives on research and knowledge, criticality of oppression and oppressive social and cultural frameworks, and an ethics of care. Each of these areas are

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[70] This story is illustrative of the researchers not accounting for the effects of their work on the actual people that develop, maintain, and review code for open-source projects like this one, and the potential harm that this kind of work can do. It is also not a lack of institutional IRB coming to the rescue, as the project was approved and proceeded, even when the IRB of the University of Minnesota backtracked and retroactively declared that the research was indeed on human subjects.

discussed at length in feminist texts (DeLamotte et al., 1997; LeGates, 2012; Lorber, 2012; Mandell & Johnson, 2016; McDonald, 1998), as well as in significant works of theory (e.g., Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2019; The Combahee River Collective, 1979) and are not the focus here. However, a discussion of my negotiation of feminist ethics of care and the anti-equity groups that I study is necessary to help frame and understand my research decisions around community access, participant anonymity, and member checking. At the centre of this discussion is feminist ethics of care, and how it can, cannot, and/or should be applied when those being studied hold views and ideologies that are anti-equity in nature and antithetical to a feminist ethos.

Analysis of the ethical imperatives of researchers (both online and offline), especially feminist researchers, tends to focus on the good and bad of the relational and situational connections between the researcher and those 'being researched.' By this I mean what could happen to the participants, informants, interlocutors, etc. who are the "subjects" of the research inquiry. How do we treat these people? Do we treat those who have provided us with research data as people, or merely as objects for production and analysis? A reflexive, qualitative approach to research must ask additional questions, including: what is the researcher relationship to the area and people being researched? what are the implications of these relationships? and how might we ensure that the data we collect are fair and representative of the individuals who contributed to the research project?

A traditional feminist qualitative inquiry asks for informed consent, requesting access to communities we choose to study, doing the possible best to preserve anonymity for our participants, and conducts extensive member checking to ensure that both the representations of research data and our conclusions about the thoughts, feelings, and expressions of our participants are properly represented in our work. It also works with emancipatory or social justice goals that extend beyond the individuals who might provide research data.

Feminist Ethics of Care

The tenets of feminist qualitative practice covered in the previous section extend from feminist ethics of care. The feminist "ethics of care" as an articulated approach to research has roots in Carol Gilligan's (1977, 1987) work in, and critique of developmental psychology and her argument for an expanded conceptualization of adulthood that included the "feminine voice."

Gilligan's argument, which aimed to strike down the theoretical and hierarchical distinction between justice and care (also understood as the rationality of logic versus the irrationality of emotion), was that personal, ethical, and individual normative standards were centered exclusively on a male model, perpetuating norms that erased women and women's ways of being. "My critics say" explains Gilligan (1986) "that this story seems 'intuitively' right to many women but is at odds with the findings of psychological research. This is precisely the point I am making and exactly the difference I was exploring: the dissonance between psychological theory and women's experience" (p. 325).

The acceptance of a singular human standard based on the 50th percentile male continues (for a series of interesting and distressing examples of this, like male-only vehicular crash test dummies that make cars less safe for women and children, see Caroline Criado-Perez's (2019) work), but Gilligan's research and that of subsequent theorists (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Fraser, 1989; Held, 1993) have developed the idea of care and caring into an indispensable element of feminist ethos. For Gilligan, "the distinction between justice and care cuts across the familiar divisions between thinking and feeling, egoism and altruism, theoretical and practical reasoning," meaning that,

> "justice and care as moral perspectives are not opposites or mirror-images of one another, with justice uncaring and care unjust. Instead, these perspectives denote different ways of organizing the basic elements of moral judgment: self, others, and the relationship between them" (Gilligan, 1987, pp. 467, 469).

Fraser and Tronto (1990) defined care as,

> "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'World' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (p. 40).

This definition of care creates a flexible standard, that is carried out in action and practice, and can occur in a variety of settings and institutions (Tronto, 1998). Relative to research, the feminist ethics of care calls us to create a research practice that can help to "repair our world" by carrying feminist epistemological principles through, among other areas, the management of different realities and understandings between researcher and researched, and complex questions

of power in research and writing (Stanley & Wise, 2013, p. 23). We are called to do so by treating our research subjects as agentic actors, real people, and to understand that our research has consequences for those researched, as well as for ourselves, and society (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

My purpose in exploring the nature of the feminist ethics of care in this way is to provide context for a discussion about positioning my research using feminist theory, and how the approach that I chose might be seen as a purposeful ignorance of these feminist values. Throughout this document, I present unfiltered and obfuscated quotes from members of the communities I researched. I did not request access to the content of these groups from the moderators or other members.[71] I did not submit my work to the communities for member checking. A keen observer might then question whether the work can live up to a feminist research ethos having done none of these things?

What this means for my research

Negotiating a feminist ethics of care, ethnographic practices (see [Ethnography + Feminism: Can there be a feminist ethnography?](#) for more discussion on this), and problematic groups like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill is complicated. Rather than a single correct approach to this negotiation, there are several pathways to good quality research that take different perspectives on user identification in research data and the associated potential for amplification of problematic messaging – two concerns of importance in my work.

I believe when using public forum data (as I have with this reddit), the choice to anonymise contributors must be all or nothing. We can choose to anonymise usernames, for example, but with public data then we should be engaging with a version of Markham's (2012) fabrication in order to obfuscate the content as well. If we do not, and we choose to present that data verbatim, then it remains searchable and is easily associated with the user, rendering the obfuscation of the username pointless.[72] This complicates the discussion of user anonymization, especially when working with problematic groups, because to present the community discourses

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[71] It is important to note here that at the time of the research, neither of these groups had community research rules or guidelines in place requiring researchers of any kind to contact the group or ask permission to collect community content. In addition, there is some debate about whether community content from open communities like /r/MensRights requires special permission or IRB ethics clearance since that content is available to anyone who chooses to browse the subreddit.

[72] I will acknowledge at this point that some reddit content is not searchable.

in the most effective ways (through their own words) we must contend with notions of dehumanization and objectification from singling users out as representative.

Other authors that have worked with reddit data have approached this challenge in different ways. Some authors have chosen to include usernames. Richterich's (2014) work on Karmawhoring, Bergstrom's (2011) research on not feeding the reddit trolls and debate on reddit, Springer's (2015) dissertation on publics and counterpublics in reddit's public sphere, and some of Massanari's (2017) work uses reddit usernames along with quotations to make their arguments about the social and political landscapes of reddit. None of these authors provide a justification for the inclusion of usernames in their research products. Authors like Robards (2018) in his work on the subreddit /r/totallystraight, the research on self-disclosure online by Shelton and colleagues (2015), and Van der Nagel and Firth's (2015) exploration of anonymity on /r/gonewild all choose to leave out usernames in their research with potentially vulnerable users and each rely on the presumption of vulnerability in leaving usernames out. Perhaps most interesting for consideration are the decisions by author like Gaudette and colleagues (2020), Lumsden (2019), and Borton (2017), who each researched misogynist communities on reddit and chose to remove or obfuscate usernames from their writing. Lumsden (2019) and Borton (2017) each discuss how, even though the data they were using is public, they have made the decision to leave user names out. In Lumsden's case, the justification for this choice came through Caplan and Purser's (2019) work that suggests users should not be named because of intra-community recognition and the potential for social capital harm.

My approach to this challenge brings me back to considerations about my primary concerns in doing this research, and that (to paraphrase Fraser and Tronto (1990)) relates to a world that the most people can live in as well as possible. So, while I believe that members of these groups are people, and some of these people have been deeply affected in negative ways by the social policies and ways of being they complain about, their central messaging is not really about the emancipation of oppressed people, but rather the diminishing power of the traditionally dominant. Some of the concerns and issues that these men bring up are worthy of consideration – the anti-circumcision activism done by some members, seeing infant circumcision as a gender-specific violation of human rights is one example – but the personal and collective desire for a propagandised Western gender traditionalism, rhetorics of male domination, and intra-male hierarchy mean their rhetoric is decidedly focused on benefiting men, frequently to the expressed

detriment of women and some men. Given these considerations, for this work I take a kind of meta-level approach to the ethics of care and consider the exposure of both text and username as having the potential to move the social dial in a direction that benefits the most people, and feel justified in that decision making given the persistent public identities and social capital/credit orientations of reddit covered in [The Setting](#) chapter of this dissertation.

Even if we feel justified maintaining usernames and verbatim quotes as conscious praxis, the question of the amplification of problematic, anti-equity rhetoric, remains a difficult one. While fears of amplification may prove justified for popular media articles with a broad reach that discuss these groups (e.g., Tiffany, 2020), or even texts by academics written for a wider audience (e.g., Daniels, 2009a), the idea that dissertations or academic articles (with their limited reach, paywalls, and other challenges) would amplify counterpublic messages or convert the reader, presupposes that the readers of academic texts completely miss the point. Given the feminist nature of my work (for example) and the journals where it will be published (Cousineau, 2021b), readers are already likely to have a critical stance on men's rights rhetorics. If they do not, I find it difficult to believe that in reading my work (or other work of this type), anyone is likely to fall into men's rights or red pill ideology.

If my work did "go viral," the question would perhaps be how might I have obfuscated the data while maintaining its integrity? Markham (2012) suggests that with creative re-scripting of user data, authors can craft narratives that appropriately represent the content they wish to convey without exposing the poster. Markham calls this process fabrication, representing "the activity of combining, molding, and/or arranging elements into a whole for a particular purpose" that is "not value-laden in itself" (p. 338), but rather accomplishes sharing the message of the content while obfuscating and shielding the creator.

However, in the work of exposing problematic content to protect against it, I think obfuscating it in the ways that Markham suggests does two things: it ignores the agency of the person who originally posted the text in a public forum; and it protects them from critique. This may feel like a defensive incongruence, but if we accept that reddit is a public space, which it is, then we should also accept that users understand information posted there is also public. I believe

that they do understand this, and the concepts of throwaway accounts,[73] user verification, and persistent user pages that track content back up that belief. If that is the case, then do users really have the expectation of content privacy beyond the individual quasi-anonymity that is provided by reddit accounts? How could they?

My work is expository of the discourses of masculinity and male supremacy in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. The users I quote are not confidential informants, and I include verbatim texts to best represent what users are sharing, so it also feels like the academically appropriate approach to credit those authors in the same ways that I would credit any other author for their published work. What is the difference between reddit posts and blogs, or online articles, or other websites? There is also a question here about intentionality/expectation, and whether users have the expectation that their texts would be taken up by academics and critiqued so heavily. Certainly they did not, but I argue that this intentionality should not permit them an escape from the critical gaze, and that as authors in publicly accessible space they remain open to critique of work attributed to them. Reddit runs on critique, and in both /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill critical comments form significant portions of the discussions between users. Academic critique, although mostly more considered and extending from a better theoretical standpoint, is not all that different. The act of protecting users in spaces like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill in the same way that we would users in communities that are consistent targets for threats and oppression also gives off paternalistic and supremacist (male and White) vibes. Users from these communities are not regularly under threat of physical and sexual violence in the real way that, for example, high-profile users were/are from #gamergate (Chess & Shaw, 2015; M. Salter, 2018), women executives at the company (Pao, 2017), and women users with sexually explicit content (shared willingly or not) (Massanari, 2017; Van der Nagel & Frith, 2015), are under threat. For all these reasons, I choose to include usernames in my research.

One final consideration is the decision not to conduct interviews or member checking as part of my research. In this regard I position my research like Daniels' (2009a) on cyber racism and White supremacist groups online, in that given my interest in the ideologies of masculinity

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[73] Throwaway accounts are created by users to post content they do not want associated with their main reddit account. These accounts often post unpopular opinions, content that might be incriminating for the user, embarrassing information, or not safe for work content (like porn), so that users can keep the content/comments they post disassociated from their main account.

within the larger communities, interviewing individuals was not necessarily generative. Introducing myself as a published academic with clear ideals of equity and feminist theoretical underpinnings would likely be a tough sell for open and honest research in communities that are expressly anti-feminist. Those who might be willing to speak with me may also encounter the kinds of interlocutor fear associated with informing on their own in-group communities, and would more than likely lead to unfinished doctoral research and an interrupted ethnography (Gajjala, 2002). Members of /r/MensRights see themselves as champions of equity, but how they see oppression (especially who is oppressed and how) is so different from how I do that the processes of member checking that we might regularly employ aren't likely to yield positive results. I also, like Daniels (2009a), find it "ethically troubling to interview subjects that I disagreed with so fundamentally" (p. 204) not because I am concerned about amplifying their voices (my platform, after all, is much smaller than Daniels'), but because the individual justifications for subscribing to the collective ethos are less compelling to me at this time than the ways those individuals come together to form the ideology of the whole. So, while individuals may be able to pick and choose elements of the larger ideological framework, and then represent this cherry-picked interpretation of that ideology in an interview to justify their own involvement, the discourses coming from the community are less able to ignore, downplay, or hide more radical, violent, or exclusionary elements.

So, we must circle back to the discussion on the ethics of care, and the question of whether I owe the same ethics of care I would afford to participants that I consider vulnerable to the individual users of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill? My answer, as evinced by the previous five pages, is complicated, but in this research, I believe that the meta-ethical stance of working towards a socially just world in a way that may or may not expose those who work against that goal is paramount. To simply know that terrible things happen is not enough, we need to identify the speakers so that we can call them out when needed.

Is this work (E)thnography?
The above sections do the work of explaining developments of ethnographic practice, the implications of the digital into ethnography, and lay out my own approach to ethnographic work in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, but some readers may still be asking themselves whether what I did is indeed ethnography? This question hinges on the idea of what makes a research project Ethnography (capital E) or what makes a project ethnographic? The former, Ethnography

with a capital 'E' is a kind of monolith, a singular way of knowing and doing that is integral to the identity of many researchers, particularly anthropologists (Howell, 2017; Ingold, 2014). The latter is more malleable way of doing and representing research, that while maintaining rigorous concepts that separate and define it from other methods and methodologies, is less territorial.

The distinction that I make here builds from Carole McGranahan's (2018) idea of *Ethnographic Sensibility* where she divides the ethnographic into method, theory, and writing, and asks the researcher and reader to decide if each of these elements carry an ethnographic sensibility? Rather than asking if a project is Ethnographic (capital E, full-stop), McGranahan contends (and I agree) that we are better to parse out the elements of the project and ask if they are ethnographic – it is possible to write ethnographic work that was not done using ethnographic methods, and we can use ethnographic methods and not write ethnographically. The tenets that make the work of research ethnographic, the elements that can give it an ethnographic sensibility can be complicated a hard to pin down (Marcus & Cushman, 1982; McGranahan, 2014); "it is easy to see and name what is not ethnographic" says McGranahan, "that which is merely description or observation or some other form of qualitative data" (2014, p. 2). But McGranahan (2018) describes, using the three substantive area of ethnographic sensibility, how we might see and understand work as ethnographic:

> The ethnographic is a culturally-grounded way of both being in and seeing the world. It is both ontological and epistemological. It is all that goes without saying in terms of what is considered normative or natural, and yet is also the very rules and proclaimed truths – about the way things are, and the way they should be – that underlie both everyday and ritual beliefs and practices. […] In terms of theory, the ethnographic drives theory through its attention to disjuncture, to things that cannot be translated, to conceptual excess that is both taken for granted and expected […]. In terms of method, getting to the ethnographic is the goal, and participant-observation is key to attaining this goal. In terms of writing, an ethnographic sensibility conveys anthropological expectations of field-based knowledge of realities of a given community, on life as lived in both ordinary and extraordinary time and place. (p. 2)

Parsed out, what makes research and writing ethnographic then is that the work is long-term, immersive, and reflexive (Howell, 2017; McGranahan, 2018).

McGranahan's ethnographic sensibility falls in line with earlier calls to adopt an 'ethnographic attitude' (Skeggs, 2014). Citing Haraway (1997), Skeggs explains that ethnographic sensibility is "a way of remaining mindful and accountable. It is not about taking sides in a predetermined way but is about the risks, purposes and hopes embedded in knowledge projects" (p. 437). While questioning if attitude is enough to do justice to the rigorous research of feminist-minded ethnographers, Skeggs concludes that pervasive and vigilant use of feminist approaches might well make headway for feminist ethnographers in the "main-male-stream."

With these ideas in mind, the answer to the question of "is this ethnography" for the work in this dissertation is yes. And no.

The methods are long term and immersive, with over three years of community participation through listening and monitoring content and discussion, and hundreds of hours in data collection and review of the systematically collected data. The use of feminist theory with its calls for researcher responsiveness to both personal and cultural pressures in contextualizing research and researcher presence, and masculinities theories that directly reflect and refract my own experiences as a man are necessarily reflexive. This reflexivity finds its way into much of my writing, and especially in this dissertation the labour of writing my own experiences into the research and research decisions, as well as writing myself at risk (C. W. Johnson, 2009), is present throughout. But this research does not contain some of the important features of Ethnography. Specifically, it does not include researcher/interlocutor conversations or interviews, nor does it engage with data member checking to clarify researcher assumptions and conclusions. It could also have extended beyond reddit in a more significant way, to other sites and/or to in-person events.[74] Going beyond the first-order links that were provided in user posts by bringing in other websites or content spaces, or attending targeted events, may have helped better understand the culture these subreddits represent.

The writing in this dissertation is and is not ethnographic. The manuscripts of chapters four ("*Entitled to Everything*") and five ("*A Positive Identity for Men?*") are more "traditional" qualitative representations of my research. They present data content from the community subreddits and contextualize that content through theory as representative of the discourses of

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[74] Given the timeline of the research, this was impossible due to COVID restrictions on research and widespread cancellation of in-person events.

masculinity in the communities, how they interact, and how reddit assists those discourses in the development of more extreme ideologies for the users. They are not represented in a particularly ethnographic way (i.e., as an anthropological field report), but it could be argued that the presentation of data collected over time, combined with the insights of long-term observation that allowed me to make my arguments in both chapters could represent McGranahan's "field-based knowledge of realities of a given community, on life as lived in both ordinary and extraordinary time and place" (2018, p. 2). Chapter six (*Applications of a Digital Ethnographic Assemblage Theory-Method*), along with the prologue, epilogue, chapters 1-3 and 7 contain much more of the reflexivity and contextual information that we might expect from ethnographic writing. Particularly in chapter six, the development of the theory-method I propose is based almost exclusively on my experiences as a long-term researcher in the field and the translation of my struggles in the work of digital ethnographic data analysis with the large scale (in volume and across time) of the project I undertook.

Ethnography + Feminism: Can there be a feminist ethnography?
As indicated in the previous section, there are some difficulties with marrying feminism and ethnography. The epistemological issues covered above notwithstanding, there are additional challenges when trying to work with ethnography and feminist theory on what Fielding (1990) calls "unloved groups." The conflict that gives rise to these difficulties, like those discussed relative to a feminist ethics of care, is between the emancipatory works and ideas that are essential to feminism and feminist theory, versus the imperative to expose anti-equity work and rhetoric with the intention of supporting emancipatory work.

In her critique of a feminist Ethnography, Judith Stacey (1988) explores the idea that no matter what, an "ethnography will betray a feminist principle" (p. 24). Her argument is two-fold. First, the human relationships Ethnography depends on place "research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer" (p. 23) given the exploitative relationship created by the researcher/researched relationship. This potentially exploitative situation runs contrary to the feminist work for empowerment and the flattening of researcher/researched power dynamics, and maintains power with the researcher. Second, an Ethnography is "structured primarily for a researcher's purposes, offering a researcher's interpretations, registered in a researcher's voice" (p. 23). Here again, the participant or object of the Ethnography is subjugated in a way that creates a power differential that is untenable with a

feminist ethos. In 1988 Stacey could not see a feminist Ethnography, but she did identify cracks in the "main-male-stream" through a "keen sensitivity to structural inequalities [by feminism] in research and to the irreconcilability of Otherness" (p. 25). 30 years later, McGranahan's (2018) work addresses many of the issues that Stacey identified as problematic in the union between feminism and Ethnography.

Critiques like Stacey's are important to the discussion at hand, because one of the challenges with feminist ethnographic work that explores communities with problematic ideological discourses is that no matter how we approach the ethnographic project we are in danger of betraying feminist principles. If we, as discussed earlier in this chapter, adopt a feminist ethics of care relative to the individuals who are members of our study communities, then we are in danger of exposing messages and ideologies without identifying their sources, effectively broadcasting a message (in one way or another) without the possibility of social accountability for those who have generated the messages.[75] If, on the other hand, we choose to expose the users who have produced the content through including their usernames in academic texts, and not obfuscating their texts in some way, then we are not extending an ethics of care to them that we have agreed is essential to feminist research, and we are potentially giving them a different platform for the broadcast of their massaging.

The re-visitation of my ethics discussion from earlier is essential because it highlights that the ethical decision-making when conducting feminist informed ethnographic research on 'unloved communities' is ongoing. The researcher monologue dissecting the research project while asking "is this research feminist?" and "is this research Ethnography/ethnographic?" is a continual task and these questions have correlated answers.

Answering both yes and no to questions of identity about research seems like a way to get around the question, but asking whether research is (E)thnography is concomitant with an epistemological perspective that ethnography is a monolithic and singular way of approaching, doing, and representing research. The concept of ethnographic sensibility, while being no less robust than its singular counterpart in Ethnography allows for other ways of being, knowing, and representing in ethnographic practice, and is much better aligned with feminist critiques of the

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[75] This type of broadcast without accountability is likely one of the attractions of having discussions and interactions on quasi-anonymous platforms like reddit.

gatekeeping limitations of post-positivist inquiry. Approaching the question of ethnographic work through the concept of ethnographic sensibility allows for an acceptable middle in the discussion of whether feminism and ethnography can come together, and permits work like mine, with a complicated and fluctuating relationship with the long-term, immersive, and reflexive requirements in methods, writing, and theory, to justifiably be called ethnography (lower-case e).

Collection/Generation of Empirical Materials

Creation of empirical materials for this dissertation research had two parts: observation with listening participation that included field notes and journaling about broad observations/comments, and systematic thread capture that included the creation of a research notes data workbook and more detailed comments/field notes. These parts, like all ethnography, are necessarily interconnected, with the persistent observation and listening happening before, during, and after the capture of threads.

Observation and Listening

Observation is a key component in ethnographic research, and while the work covered in this dissertation is not a traditional ethnographic study, being a member of the study communities and watching the community posts over time (both inside and outside the systematic collection of materials) has been an important part of understanding patterns of posts and areas of interest. I have been a member of both communities, either in a research capacity or through my own reddit account, since September of 2017, before /r/TheRedPill was quarantined. Time spent in these communities varied over time and circumstance.

/r/TheRedPill

My observation of /r/TheRedPill was intermittent from my joining the community in 2017 until after the completion of my proposal and acceptance of my ethics application in May of 2019. I would occasionally venture into the community and check out the top posts. After ethics approval I added a subscription to the subreddit on my mobile reddit app and began to see more regular posts. Like any other subscription, if the content posted piqued my interest, I would enter the thread and read the post and several comments. Because of the predominance of longer text posts on the subreddit, I found that reading them on mobile was often complicated or tiring, like trying to read any long document on a small screen.

My behaviour changed as I moved into capturing posts, spending more time looking at top posts and some of the top comments as I moved through the capture of the threads. This was completed on PC and the larger, multiple screens allowed for better viewing and reading experiences with long posts.

After the post collection was complete, I returned to viewing the community on my mobile device. With the changing subscription behaviour over time on my reddit account, /r/TheRedPill posts were largely absent from my regular content aggregation and I removed my subscription from the community at the beginning of 2021.

/r/MensRights

I have been subscribed to /r/MensRights since the beginning of my Ph.D. studies in 2016. I found interest in the community because of their presentation as a counter-feminist movement that claimed men as subordinated. At that time, I was trying to understand how young men I encountered could be so staunchly anti-feminist and what communities they connected with. From that time, the community has been part of my regular subscriptions on my personal reddit account, and was also subscribed on my research reddit account. The community is regularly active each day,[76] and posts have appeared steadily on both accounts since that time. With the recent increase in subscribers to over 300,000, posts appear regularly (one in my top 20-30 posts) in my aggregated feed. My regular engagement with this community is like it was with /r/TheRedPill in that if the title of the post is of interest, I will explore the thread. Comments almost always devolve into anti-feminist rhetoric or repetitious talking points related to the main arguments of the men's rights movement.

Like with /r/TheRedPill, my engagement also changed when I began my captures. Sorting posts in different ways, and engaging with the subreddit directly, versus through posts channelled by the aggregation algorithm, presented more content and a better opportunity to see who was posting. Capturing through two different sorting schemas also showed which posts were seen as more controversial than others – something that is absent from aggregated user feeds. When my period of thread capture ended, /r/MensRights returned to a place of casual

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[76] Regularly between 25 and 35 posts per day, and averaging about 850 comments per day (subredditstats.com, 2021)

engagement through my personal reddit account. I remain subscribed to this subreddit and see posts regularly in my feed.

Systematic Thread Capture

The more substantial and systematic collection of empirical materials was done through the capture of entire threads. Over three months, beginning in April 2020 and ending in July 2020, empirical materials were collected from /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill three times per week. Collection was done during this period, while I was on parental leave, to served as a kind of brain break from the rigors of new parenthood. This timeframe was selected because our child was old enough that the very difficult period of new parenthood had waned, and it was close enough to my return to work that the cultural context of the posts would not be completely lost. Also, our activity was restricted at this time due to COVID-19, and this research activity provided a change of pace. Beyond the considerations listed here, no strategy was employed to ensure that data collected in the capture phase had a particular analytical richness (meaning that posts were not collected and the timeframe was not selected to coincide with any particular event or social context), and the posts were purposefully collected in a rolling chronological fashion to capture how users would experience the subreddit communities as observers who looked at only the hottest or most controversial posts several times a week. Some note taking was done during the time of data capture (including the initial coding in the research workbook), though thorough analysis of the captures was not completed until my return to work in September, 2020. Collection consisted of the five posts that appeared at the top of the content from each subreddit, twice each session, using two of the built-in sorting filters for reddit content: hot and controversial. This approach yielded the top five most popular posts and the five most controversial posts at the time of collection for both subreddits. Overall, this approach generated 580 captured threads, averaging just under 46 comments per thread, and a total of 23,149 comments. The remainder of this sub-section will cover the software used for this process, and the procedures used in each session to collect the data.

Data collection software

The software used for materials collection is divided into viewing and capture. These categories are explained below:

Viewing

Data collection was completed entirely on PC, using privacy-focused browsers to access reddit. While the initial plan was to use exclusively Waterfox, a privacy-oriented offshoot of Firefox, to keep data collection and personal internet use separate. This proved problematic due to the need to use the legacy version of reddit for one part of the data collection (see old.reddit.com text box). To work around the sorting issue discussed in the text box below, I used the Brave browser (a privacy-focused chromium-based browser) as a second browser with settings that defaulted to the old version of reddit. Both browsers were compatible with the "Send to OneNote" extension used to capture threads (see "Capture" section below). The user account created for my comprehensive exam process, /u/LearnStuffAboutStuff, was used as the reddit account for collection, keeping the data collection separate from my personal reddit use.

Capture

After much trial and error using different software and browser plugins, I used Microsoft OneNote's "Send to OneNote" browser plugin to capture the reddit threads in conjunction with an excel spreadsheet to capture data about individual posts. Send to OneNote worked with both browsers I used and captured the entire post as an image, importing it directly to OneNote. The plugin also gives the option of naming the post, choosing the notebook where the post would be captured, tagging posts and images when needed, and native OCR image text search in the captured images. Send to OneNote was an excellent tool for capturing entire posts that included all the visual content from the subreddit. Posts appear as long, single, scrollable images that can be viewed in the same type of long-form scroll as when the posts are viewed online, and combined with the reddit setting to show all posts and replies for threads, does a good job of capturing the content. Other capture methods were either unable to work with the scrolling nature of reddit's interface, thus not capturing the entire thread, or produced image/pdf files that were impossible to navigate appropriately for analysis due to overlapping text and images, inability to parse out page headers and footers from main page content, or creating spaces between pages that deleted some content (see one example in figure 4-1).
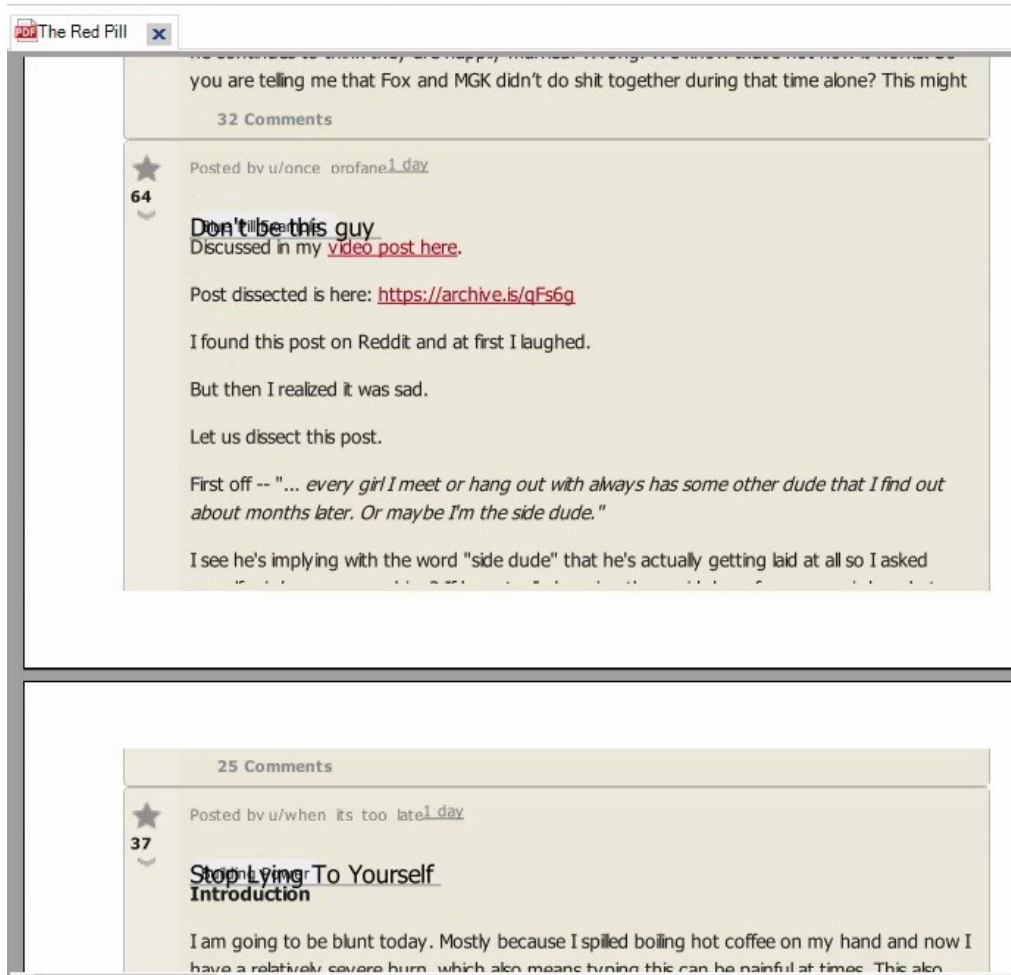
Figure 4-1: Sample image from NCapture, NVivo extension for capturing web content for import and analysis in the NVivo software. Along with extensive white space, elements of the data are cut-off or missing, and some text overlaps, rendering the data image useless.

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old.reddit.com

In 2018 reddit made a major change to the user interface, moving the site to an infinite scroll front page and subreddits, as well as making many other graphical and interface changes (see figure 4-2 below). Some of these changes were made, among other useability reasons, to optimize the site for mobile browsing. One of the changes that came with this major overhaul was a modified set of sorting selections as part of the top bar on subreddits and user landing pages. This modification eliminated the "controversial" sort selection from the available list by default. Subreddits can activate the "controversial" sort within their communities (/r/MensRights has done this), but most do not. /r/TheRedPill has not made this sorting available, but it is still available through the legacy (old) version of reddit. The entirety of the site is available in this way through old.reddit.com, and provides a less graphically and computationally demanding reddit experience for those users who may need or want such a thing. I used old.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill to access the controversial sort during my research.
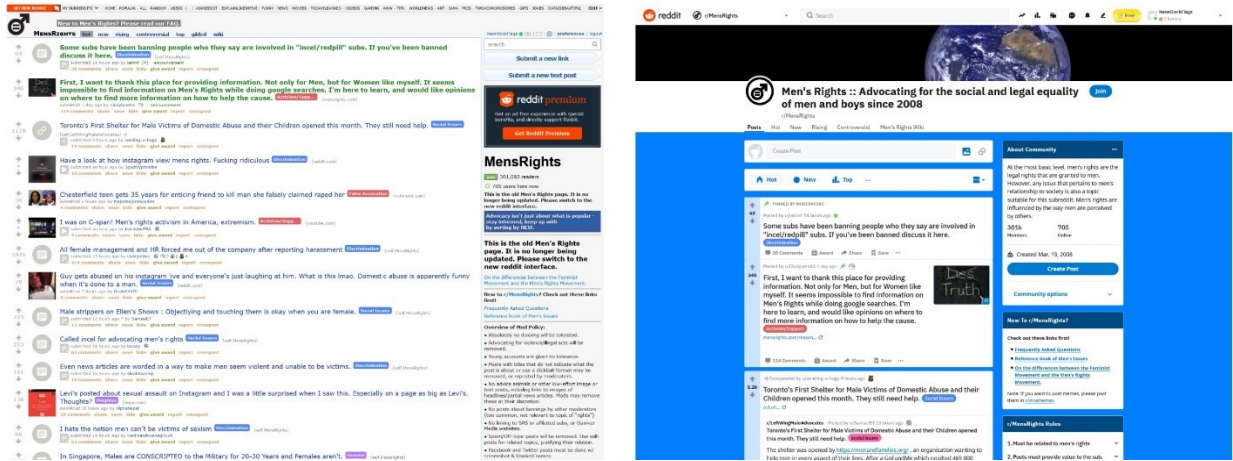
Figure 4-3: Side-by-side showing reddit's old interface (left) and new interface (right) for the same subreddit - /r/MensRights, April 29, 2021.

The excel sheet used in this research contained data points for the individual posts that were captures, at the time of their capture. These data points include: a unique post code; the rank when captured; the date and time of capture; the score at the time of capture; the name of the poster; the amount of time the post had been active on the subreddit; the percentage of upvotes the post hasd received; the number of comments; the post title; a direct link to the thread; and sections for notes and main themes (figure 4-3).

Figure 4-2: Reddit data spreadsheet showing data points recorded for each post.

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The Send to OneNote method of capture, while simple, was not without challenges. OneNote sometimes had difficulty working with very large image files and would display them poorly rendered and difficult to read. The work-around for this issue was to view them in the online version of OneNote (rather than the desktop version) where they displayed clearly. The online version of OneNote has slightly lower functionality for search than the desktop version, but this was not a significant issue. Also, because the captures are images and not PDF or another format, links and other content is not clickable. The work-around for this issue was two-fold. For posts themselves, linked content that was part of the post was copied into the notes field provided by Send to OneNote and appears at the top of captures (figure 4-4). In addition, if the link was to outside content a sub-note and capture were taken to keep a copy of that content as it appeared on the day of viewing (figure 4-5). For in-thread links or other active content, a software tool (Kleptomania – covered in more detail in the analysis section) was used to extract text (if needed) to follow the link.
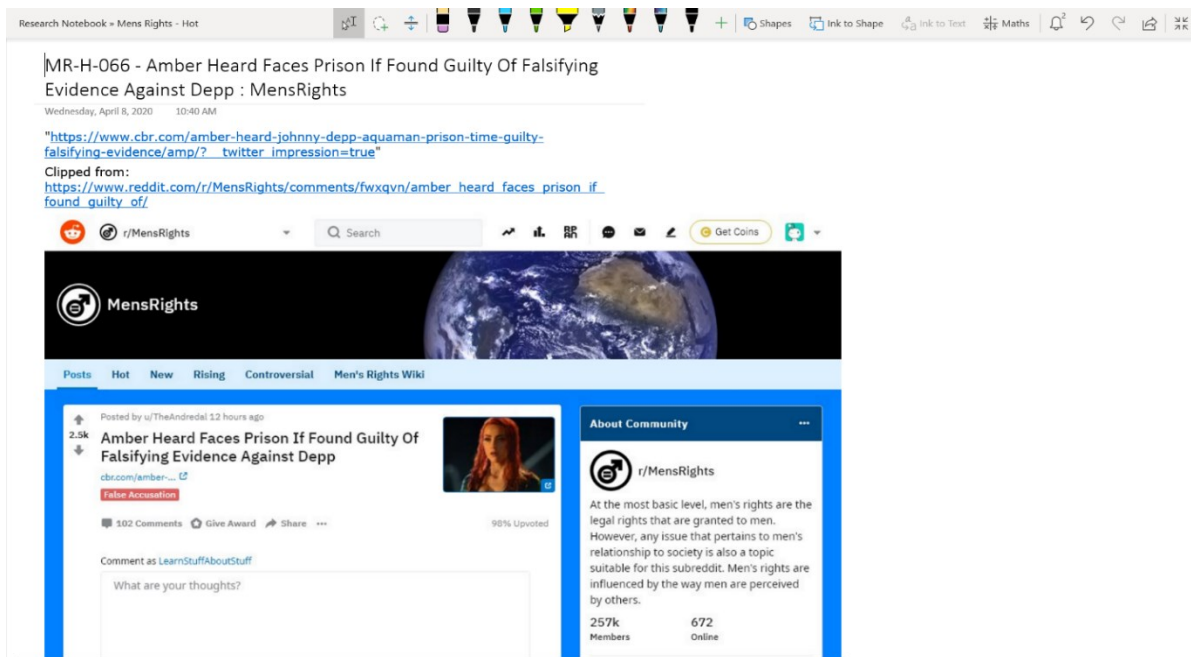
Figure 4-4: OneNote Capture of reddit thread showing copied post link and log information.

The final decision to use OneNote and the Send to OneNote browser add-on was based in the fact that it was the only program I could find at the time (late 2019, early 2020) that could provide the seamless and lossless representation of threads that I was seeking. Other software that I tried at the time included:

- Stand alone browser add-ons, including Snagit and Fireshot (early 2020 version) – These add-ons/extensions, although they could capture good screenshots or 2-3 screen-sized images, they were unable to scroll and capture the entirety of long threads, leaving information missing.
  - The version of Fireshot available in August of 2021 does a much better job of handling the capture of threads, and would be a useable alternative to Send to OneNote in this version.
- Evernote and Evernote pro – captures in Evernote often included confused, oversized, and out of place icons, and overlaid content with usernames and other information. The PDFs generated by the Evernote tool were not functional for data collection and analysis
- NCapture for NVivo – Covered earlier in this section, NCapture produced unreadable documents with a lot of white space and poor formatting.
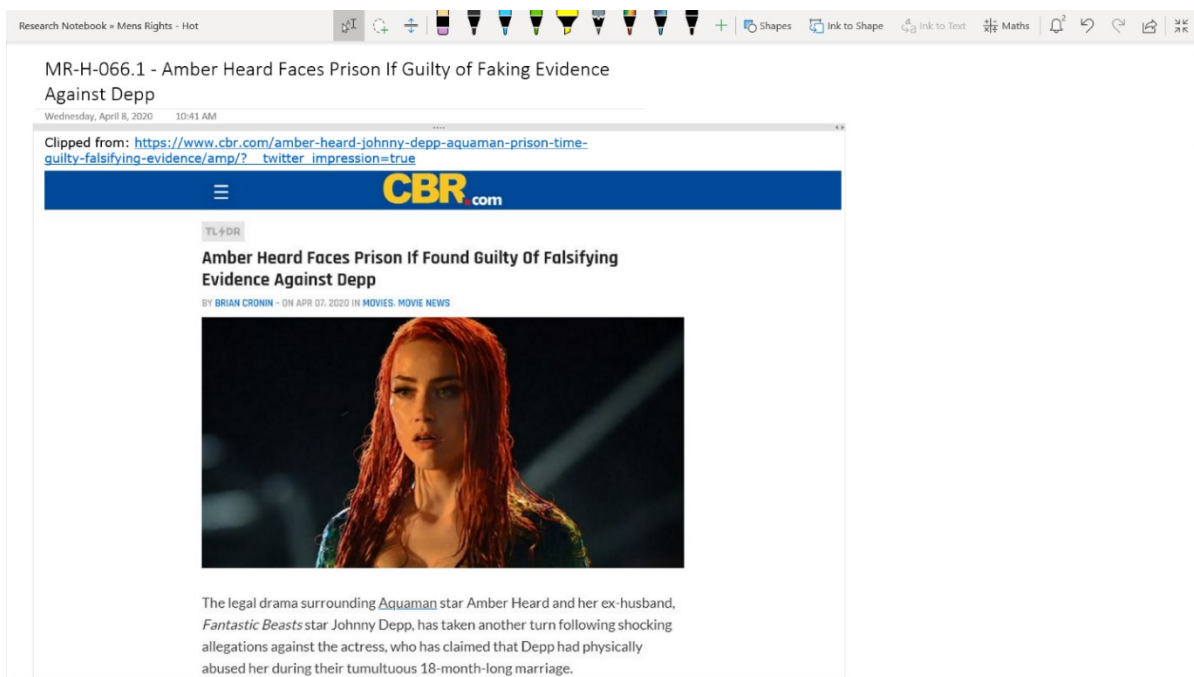
Figure 4-5: OneNote capture showing the linked-content from research reddit thread MR-H-066.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this project turned to a promiscuity of methods (Berbary & Boles, 2014; Berbary & Johnson, 2012) for analysing the empirical materials. Elements of basic thematic analysis were used to help inform a more thorough discourse analysis, and select elements from Kozinets' netnographic framework that provide useful ways of thinking about and contextualizing online research were used. The following section will describe the theoretical

foundations and the practical implications of those analysis choices, as well as how analysis was assisted with software and hardware tools.

Theory

Preliminary data analysis was grounded in basic thematic analysis as outlined by Merton (1975) and Braun and Clarke (2006) as a way to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report themes found in the empirical materials (Nowell et al., 2017). While perceptually aligned as a method with post-positivist qualitative research,[77] thematic analysis is highly flexible, and can be "modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 2). Thematic analysis is a broadly used analytic tool that allows for the diversity of participant and data perspectives, has the potential to generate unanticipated insights (King, 2004), and is foundational to much qualitative inquiry. Here, I employ thematic analysis less through dogmatic and rigid adherence to stepped protocols or hierarchical coding structures (Clarke & Braun, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017), but rather as an assistive tool to help in other types of analytic practice (Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Terry et al., 2017).

I employ discourse analysis to help me frame my empirical materials. In particular, I use what Dick (2004) calls critical discourse analysis – "a method that examines how individuals use language to produce explanations of themselves, their relationships and the world in general" (p. 203). Language is essential to the ways that individuals formulate understandings, as well as police and construct the social and personal realities of life (Lather, 1996). The language, along with the constructs it allows, are important. "The constructions individuals make operate not only to 'make sense', but also to reproduce or challenge ideological systems of belief that exist in society at large" (Dick, 2004, p. 204). For Foucault, both knowledge and power are discursive, in that they are created by the use of language, and that the control and influence created by the use of language and social discourses are co-constructed (Foucault, 1984). Inevitably, it is through the discourses which influence our lives where social disciplinary power influences the individual (Foucault, 1979). Discourses, and their influences and implementations "effectively produce different versions of what counts as 'normal' social practice" (Dick, 2004, p. 205) – how we word our worlds (or sometimes how they are worded for us) matters (Berbary, 2018; St.

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[77] Evinced by Nowell et al.'s (2017) insistence that thematic analysis can (and should) be regimented to make it standardized, "rigorous and methodical" (p. 1), or Boyatzis' (1998) description of thematic analysis as a translator between the languages of qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Pierre, 2000). Fairclough (1993) theorised that individual identity, relationships, and ideological systems are each constituted by discourse, and building on this work, as well as the work of Mama (2002), Dick (2004) recommends that discourse is analysed in three ways: discursive practice, social practice, and text.

When examining discursive practice, the context is important, as the context of the discussion serves to inform how we interpret both the intentions and intended outcomes. When exploring discursive practice through reddit, reading comments and sub-threads relationally to the original post is essential to helping understand the structures of direction and ideological wayfinding happening within communities (Simon, 2013). Community discursive practices direct conversation in certain ways, and following the connections and disconnections of content can help to understand overall community discourse (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Kanjere, 2019). Analysis of social practice within discourse is about examining what constructs and hegemonies might be at play, even as unintended or tacit understandings – what is acceptable and unacceptable in the group, and how do those social practices inform discursive practices (Wodak, 2013)? How do the presumptions and 'taken-for-granteds' within the discourse imply deep social and cultural power and control structures, and what reciprocal influence might they have on individuals and social life? For example, the anti-feminist foundations of reddit communities in the manosphere configure a social practice of assumed wrongdoing on the part of feminists or feminist allies, leading to pervasive anti-feminist discourse that comes to bear in almost all conversations whether feminism is directly implicated or not (Ging, 2019a). The analytic focus on the text is about how it is constructed, writing style, elements of emphasis (e.g., ALLCAPS), attention to grammatical detail, the emotional valence the writer is trying to convey, as well as what outcomes the text itself is trying to achieve, and whether it achieves that perceived aim.

To complement thematic and discourse analysis, I use some concepts from Kozinets' (2015) netnography framework for analysis. Although I find Kozinets' overall approach to online research too prescriptive, limiting, and problematic in his assumptions about the role of the researcher in online spaces, several of his "intellectual implements" (p. 200) for analysis are useful for thinking about the analytic process. In particular, the processes of imagining, re-memorying, and cultural decoding are useful in thinking through data analysis. Although I will discuss these elements in a kind of linear way, Kozinets is clear in his description that all seven

implements he describes are interpenetrating, and therefore blend together and overlap in important ways, making them sometimes feel similar to one-another.

The first of Kozinets' implements is *Imagining* where the researcher uses the field notes, memos, and their own thinking to link these elements together to create a "stream of consciousness association" (p. 201). This process is open and free and is positioned in a way that allows the researcher to further think on and discuss with themselves issues of subjectivity and reflexivity relative to the current project, as well as the data already taken in and subconsciously analysed. Next is the process of *Re-Memorying*, where the researcher recalls what they can from the data and the interactions captured in the data (if the data contains interactions). This remembering allows the researcher to contemplate which elements are most interesting and most easily remembered as they work through the process, providing insight into how the data might resonate with others and the research audience. This process is like the type of memory work normally used in Collective Memory Work, where the memories and associated personal and social influences are not contingent on the *verbatim* 'accuracy' of what is being recalled, but rather on the deeper influences of that feeling and action as it is being recalled (Johnson, Kivel, & Cousineau, 2018).

The third significant part of Kozinets' interpenetrating implements is *Cultural Decoding*. Here Kozinets argues for the compilation of the diverse data gathered as part of the project, then "try[ing] to fit the pieces together" to "understand the cultural categories which we can use to classify [the data]" (p. 202). Here, we are looking to place the data within the cultural codes which make sense of, and apply meaning to, the data. These culture codes are "the unconscious meaning we apply to any given thing – a car, a type of food, a relationship, even a country – via the culture in which we are raised" (Rapaille, 2006, p. 5). By doing so, we layer, as a measure of our own experience and analysis, the cultural milieu where we believe the data comes from, with our own understanding of that data object.

Practice

The practice of data analysis for this research has two layers: a long-term, ethnographically focused observation layer that includes the thoughts, notes, and ideas from the long-term observations that I conducted of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill (this layer was in-process before, during, and after the other layer); and a focused review of the post data collected during

the April-July 2020 data collection period. Analysis of data notes and observations made over the observation period was ongoing, creating reflective notes and potential connections as I engaged with my listening observations of these subreddits. The notes, and analysis meta-notes were integrated into, and served as the initial template for, the larger data notebook that was created during the review of the collected posts.

> **Categorizing posts versus comments**
>
> The threaded nature of reddit posts and comments gives some important analytic nuance to working with these empirical materials. Because comment sub-threads can be long and have many levels of child comments, they sometimes move into different thematic territory than the original post. For example, posts about domestic violence against men quite frequently generated discussions about feminism and anti-feminism, so while posts were categorized easily, threads sometimes required several distinct categorizations as sub-threads touched on different thematic areas.

Directed and focused data analysis sessions began in September of 2020 and continued through the beginning of 2021. This timeline corresponds with the return to work from a parental leave, so while some analysis and consideration of post themes was underway during the data collection period (April-July) based on post titles, links, and texts, threads were not reviewed in detail until the analysis period beginning in September.

As posts were collected by capturing the first five posts that appeared in the curated feed of each subreddit sorted by reddit's 'hot' filter and 'controversial' filter, and chronologically over the collection period, my review and analysis of thread content followed this same pattern. I began with the number one post collected from /r/MensRights 'hot' posts, then I moved systematically through all the /r/MensRights 'hot' posts before moving on to /r/MensRights 'controversial', followed by /r/TheRedPill 'hot' and 'controversial' in the same fashion. I chose this approach (reviewing all 'hot' posts in /r/MensRights, for example, before moving to 'controversial') because I believed that reviewing the material that reddit deemed popular independently of what it deemed controversial would give a good understanding of the larger themes that the communities supported versus the content where they disagreed. Also, given the time lapse between the data collection and deep analysis, reviewing content in a single subreddit, sorted in a certain way, chronologically, gives an experience that is potentially more like the

experience of users of the subreddit (sorting by hot or controversial regularly) than consistently switching back and forth. My decision to do the analysis of both sets from /r/MensRights before moving on to /r/TheRedPill was made for a few reasons. The first is my own interest in the positionality of /r/MensRights relative to feminist views of oppression and social order. Their antithetical view of oppression and gender power was (and is) interesting to me and drove me to take on this analysis first. Also, by the time of my thorough analysis phase, I had begun to see more academic literature about The Red Pill appear in journal articles and book chapters, and so while I remained interested in the group, more of their significant discourses were beginning to appear and be interrogated in the literature. The effect of this approach is that /r/MensRights perhaps gets slightly more attention in my analysis as the fatigue of reviewing 23,000+ posts and comments had really set in by the time I got to /r/TheRedPill.

Each post was reviewed, reading the text provided by the poster, following any major link provided, and/or watching any media that was included as part of the post (this included YouTube videos, news articles, blog posts, and links to other websites). After this, I read the top three parent comments and using the information from the post and those comments I noted a basic thematic structure to the arguments being made in the post. I then read through all the thread comments sequentially, as they were presented in the thread. This means that the sub-threads formed under each parent comment in the post were read in their entirety before moving onto the next parent comment and its sub-threads. After the first 25 posts were reviewed, I noted significant themes that emerged from the posts and threads. For example, this early list for /r/MensRights included: anti-feminism; base arguments for the community; solidarity; domestic violence; relationships; body issues; masculinity; and cultural bias. Posts were then given one, or more, of these designations as I worked my way through the posts and comments. As I began categorizing posts, I created a column in the excel data workbook to track if threads had anti-feminist themes, but the presence of these themes was so overwhelming that I abandoned that tracking effort after about 50 posts (48 of them had direct and identifiable anti-feminist content).

As analysis progressed, these initial themes were expanded, contracted, separated, and augmented with comments and thematic content from comments throughout the set of empirical materials. Broader discourses began to emerge, including broad adherence to the politics of the right, male superiority, questioning of women's (in particular feminist's) rationality and intelligence, and meritocratic neoliberal understandings of work and personal value (see figure 4-

6 for one example).When specific themes or connections were identified in the comments or posts, that content was either recorded in the research notes, or copied and pasted as exemplars using the Kleptomania tool (figure 4-7), creating an ongoing library of content. The result is a searchable database of content that reflects the significant themes and discourses that emerged from the data, ready to be re-inscribed under the deeper categories of discourse.
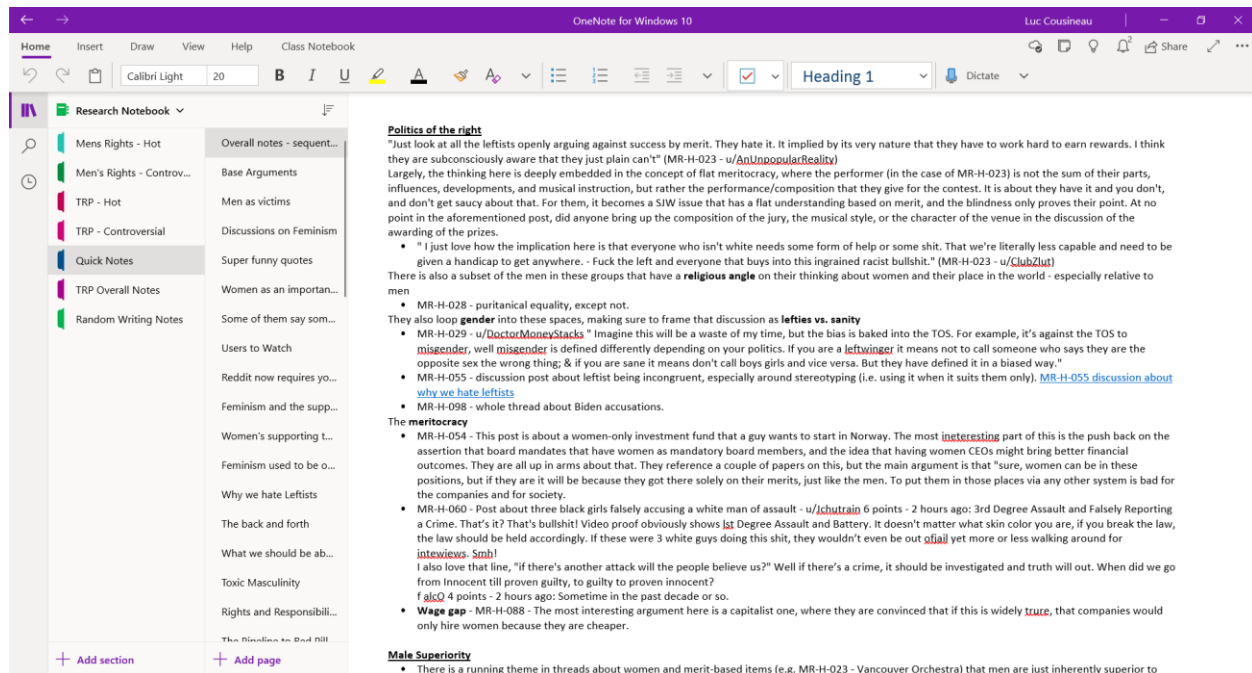
Figure 4-6: Screen capture of OneNote data notes reflecting politics of the Right in /r/MensRights.

Technology

The practice of data analysis required a variety of technological tools that I will describe here. These included hardware and software tools independent and co-dependent on those used in the process of capturing described earlier in this chapter. I will not discuss my internet access (beyond use of cloud storage) or the variety of hardware and software implicated in the functioning of the internet. Nor will I discuss my physical desk or workspace, or the variety of software products that allow my research software to function, beyond copy and paste features integrated into Windows. These are all important and essential to the research outcomes I discuss in this dissertation, but they are not the focus of my inquiry here.
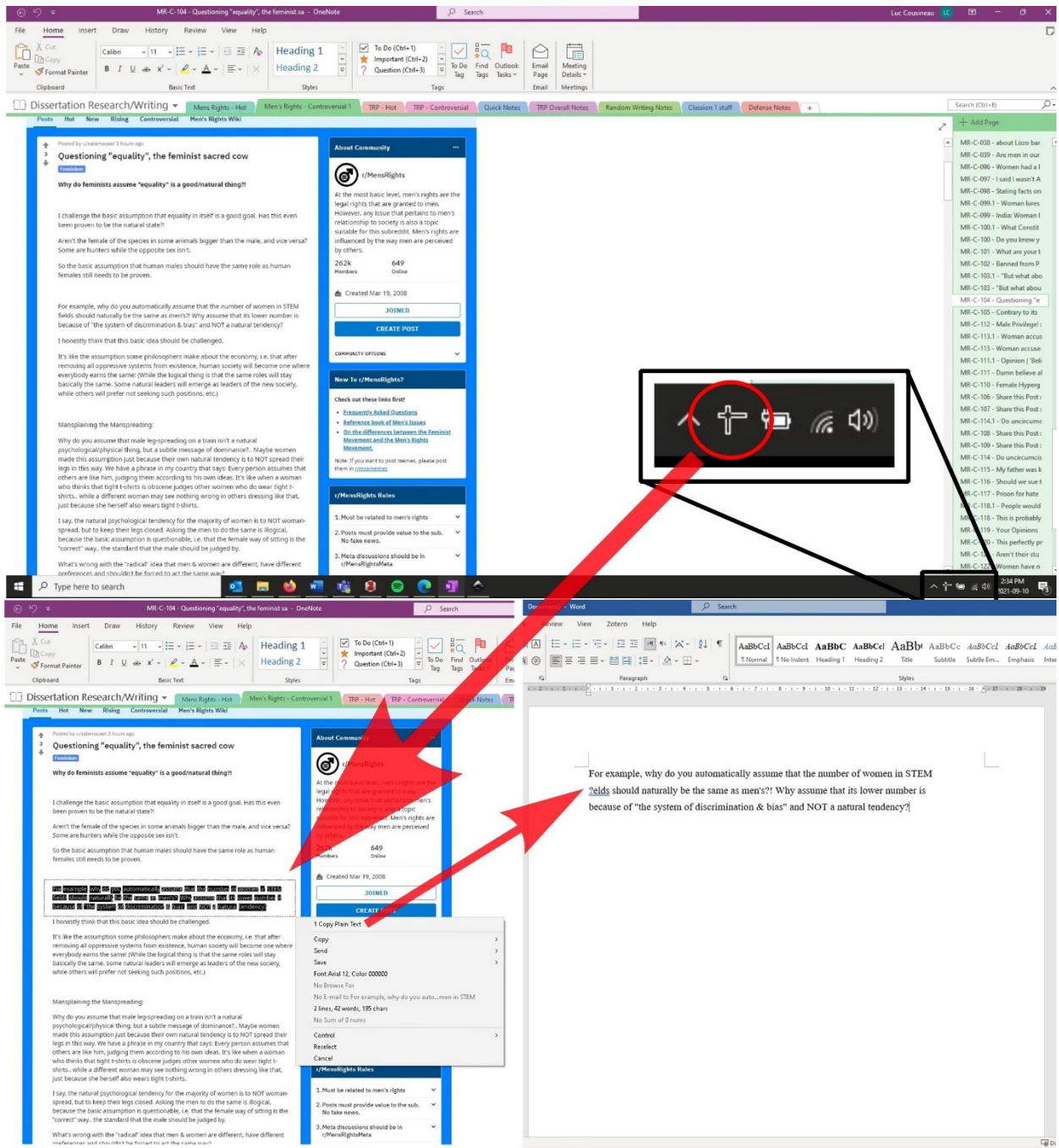
Figure 4-7: Using Kleptomania OCR software to capture text from a research image and convert it to plain text for inclusion in research data notes or writing.

Hardware

The hardware for analysis included two different laptop computers,[78] an external 22" monitor, wireless keyboard and mouse, and occasionally noise cancelling wireless headphone and desktop speakers when needed (figure 4-8). While the inclusion of a second monitor, as well as wireless keyboard and mouse are pragmatic (and ergonomic) and make the tasks of analysis and data ordering easier, they became essential to the workflow and ease of moving through and making notations about the large volume of data for the project. For example, given the length and complexity of some threads, having the ability to examine a thread on one screen while taking notes on the other, allowed me to get lost in threads less often, and backtrack through the data set to re-establish my connection less frequently. In retrospect, a third monitor may have increased efficiency further by allowing threads, notes, and the excel workbook to be open and accessible simultaneously.

Figure 4-8: Dissertation workspace.

Software

My analysis used Microsoft Excel and OneNote as the two primary software tools. Excel was used to maintain the research tracking workbook (see example above in figure 4-3), including some individual thread notes, as well as title and basic content information. Maintaining several

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[78] Near the end of this dissertation writing my laptop required replacement. Another reason to backup work to the cloud.

worksheets allowed for data from individual collections to remain separate and well-organized but maintained the empirical material data points in one repository. Two instances of OneNote were used simultaneously, one to review captured posts, and one to take notes and/or copy quotes from posts when needed.

To access textual data from captured post images in OneNote, a third-party software called Kleptomania was used. Kleptomania uses Optical Character Recognition (OCR) to extract text from images and allowed me to copy text from the image files in OneNote and add that text to notes and thematic content in OneNote. Kleptomania relies on the Windows operating system (OS) copy and paste function, and so my system OS was directly implicated in my analysis experience. Kleptomania converts the image text into plain text, then transfers that text to the OS clipboard that, in turn, allows me to copy that text data into another program. Without this tool, I would not have been able to copy image text, and this would have limited my ability to process and collate data through thematic and discursive analysis.

Trustworthiness

In their article about rigor and trustworthy qualitative research, Rose and Johnson (2020) describe trustworthiness as "the systematic rigor of the research design, the credibility of the researcher, the believability of the findings, and applicability of the research methods" (p. 434). It is, in other words, what we put in place to ensure that qualitative research is any good. Rose and Johnson, leveraging the work of many others, lay out these four areas to help guide other researchers, both established and early career, in designing and evaluating the qualitative research they engage in and see from others. Using their guideposts of research design, credibility of the researcher, believability, and applicability of methods, I implemented several techniques to ensure the trustworthiness of my research during this project.

Reflexivity and Subjectivity

Rose and Johnson (2020) describe subjectivity and reflexivity as related concepts where subjectivity is "the views, experiences, and positions we bring with us into our research endeavors" (p. 439), and reflexivity is "the ongoing process of incorporating personal reflections concerning our subjectivities within the context of theoretical and paradigmatic considerations across the research project, from design to dissemination" (p. 439). Although addressed in part

during the introductory chapter of this dissertation, both subjectivity and reflexivity are essential to my undertaking of the research reported here.

My own subjectivity helps to understanding why I would engage with this type of research (Berger, 2015), since as a White man in his thirties engaged with the rapidly changing social structures of a Western society, I am the target demographic of much of the rhetoric and discussion which occurs in the research area. Although I have not been through the family court system, nor have I encountered situations where I might be able to contextualize my lack of success as inappropriate privileging of others over me, I remain both a target for recruitment by men's rights activist groups, and potentially susceptible to the rhetoric.[79] My education and valuing of critical and feminist theory equip me to take in, evaluate, consider, and discuss the materials and discussions presented by the individuals and groups from the study group.

Where my subjectivity allows me some access and discussion space that may not be available to others, it also positions me in ways that were essential during this research (Pillow, 2003). Beyond the specific and important role that critical reflexivity has in the theoretical and practical development of the research and analysis, in this case the work of critical reflexivity, along with peer debriefing, played important roles in keeping me grounded outside of the worldview and filter bubble created by this research (Berger, 2015; H. Elliott et al., 2012; Pillow, 2003). Having experienced one instance of getting lost in rhetoric prior to my dissertation research while engaged with preliminary work in this area, the process of personal reflection allowed me to better contextualize the information that I was taking in through the threads, as well as the thoughts and feelings this information generated as I did so. For example, repetitious reading about the value of male dominance in romantic and personal relationships with women in /r/TheRedPill has the potential to push men to try it out, in a "what harm could it do" kind of way.[80] Through months of engagement with the community and deep reading of hundreds of posts, there were times that I wondered the same thing. Each time I wondered if these strategies might be useful to me, I would reflect on two ideas: (1) I find the kind of interpersonal control and male supremacism inherent in these ideas abhorrent at the base level; and (2) implementing

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[79] See the description about why in chapter one.
[80] In fact, some men have kept meticulous track of their efforts in this area, like the My Marriage Vs. The Red Pill blog by an anonymous author - https://mymarriagevsredpill.weebly.com/

this kind of clandestine attempt at controlling my partner would betray a commitment of trust and partnership. Thinking about it also just felt *icky*.

Along with keeping me grounded in my personal reality and helping to apply preliminary theoretical consideration to my empirical materials, personal reflection helped keep me sane. Through hundreds of thousands of words, many of which were openly hostile, supremacist, or derogatory, the reflexive process helped me keep in mind that there are reasons that each of these people have joined these groups, and reasons that they post, participate, and perpetuate what the groups discuss (Berger, 2015). Whether we agree theoretically, contextually, or literally with their ideas and concepts, the notion that each of these people has, what is for them, a good reason to spend their time and energy in these spaces is significant, and the process of reflexive thought and discussion helped keep that as an important consideration without losing myself.

Working Toward Catalytic Validity

Deep and full descriptions are essential to the type of qualitative research that can provide both substantive information, and serve as a foundation for social development – what Rose and Johnson (2020) call catalytic validity. Working in concert with, but not exclusively tied to, long-term exposure and research embeddedness, rich descriptions demonstrate thorough data collection and analysis, and allow the researcher, and others, "understand the emotional and contextual realities of people whose life experiences are often very different from theirs" (Furman et al., 2006, p. 24). These rich descriptions can take many forms, from thoroughly constructed and designed composite narratives (Berbary, 2011, 2015), to the research poems described by Furman, Lietz, and Langer (2006), or visual representations like the comix (Berbary & Guzman, 2018) and graphic novels (S. Jones & Woglom, 2017) presented by some researchers. In this dissertation, rich description includes the contextualization of included quotes in their threads, and thorough exploration of the research context beyond the two study subreddits. Using researcher experience narratives, explorations of ideological positioning through community discourses, and demonstrating gendered configurations of practices through multiple, aligned voices, the work of this dissertation positions /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill as spaces where misogyny is developed and cultivated. Doing so places them in explicit opposition to progressive and equitable social development, and provides research-driven opportunities to understand and work to limit their influence and spread.

Peer Debriefing and Discussion

As both a means of support while I engaged with this research, and as a way to discuss and work through research findings and ideas as the research progressed (Henry, 2015), I engaged in peer debriefing and discussion with several individuals. The first of these is my supervisor, who has played a significant role in helping me ensure that the thoughts, theories, and arguments I engage with during the research remained sensible, reasonable, and grounded. We met frequently, but without a regular schedule, and the ongoing research was part of larger agendas. Along with helping me interrogate my own reflexivity and researcher positioning, these meetings helped to determine appropriate research outputs, and to develop coherent arguments as analysis and experience came together.

In addition to meetings with my supervisor, I enlisted some of my peers for debriefing and discussion of my research. I attempted to form a small community for this purpose, with the reciprocity of reviewing and discussing others' research in turn. While this approach began in earnest, the demands of pandemic living, and other demands meant that the group did not last. However, one member of that group and I remained in regular contact to discuss our ongoing research journeys. These semi-regular meetings allowed me to talk through the developments of the research and the thematic content I was exposing through my readings, experience, and analysis. In addition, I have engaged with other graduate students from two outside research communities during my dissertation research, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), and the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism (IRMS). Both groups have active graduate student groups, and I engaged with other graduate students about methodological considerations related to reddit and online communities (AoIR), and the sometimes-disturbing content of men's rights and male supremacist spaces (IRMS). These researcher communities have proven invaluable in helping to see my empirical materials in context, and be reminded that the ideologies and rhetorics of these spaces are not mainstream, and need to be illuminated, interrogated, and combatted.

Summary

The preceding chapter has explored the methodological considerations that inform the study design and the researcher perspective, how and when the research was conducted, and the process of data analysis.

I began with a methodological scaffolding that, along with providing an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the research process, also explored the challenges and contestations to the way that I approached this research. Beginning with ethnography and its migration into the digital realm I explored the early digital community work of writers like Rheingold (1993) and the even more important work of interrogating gender, technologies, community, and representation online through ethnographic study and immersion in diverse online communities (e.g., Kendall, 1998, 2002; A. R. Stone, 1995; Zdenek, 1999). Digital ethnography was explored, both to demonstrate the important grounding that the practice of digital ethnography has in the literature and in practice, but also as a lever to discuss the notion of observation through listening online as a legitimate way to conduct ethnographic research.

Listening, in this case the act of engaging with an online community without producing content on the research site in question, has been a contested issue in digital ethnography and other digital qualitative research, as it adheres to the idea that participation is inherently productive in a limiting and unidimensional understanding of producing texts. Couched in an understanding of participation as actively 'producing,' in the case of online communities it ignores the large numbers of participants who consume content without commenting, and provide the consumptive engine that keeps websites and apps that provide free services (like reddit) running. I argue that continuing to use lurking as a way of describing this type of participation, perpetuates a pejorative understanding of these users as non-contributors, and merely "acting as an active drain on [community] growth" (Crawford, 2009, p. 527). The "glorification of speech" that comes along with this understanding discounts the presence of those who are listening, and without them, the speech disappears into the ether; a tree falling soundlessly in the forest. But the logical understanding that without the listener the speaker makes no sound seems to have been largely lost on the research community relative to online groups. My argument in this chapter, and for the way that I conducted my research in this dissertation, is that listening as a methodological decision can build powerful reflections of what is happening in the communities we study for those who choose not to produce texts.

An extension of the decision to listen as research praxis are the ethical considerations that come with taking in, working with, and presenting research on problematic communities. Building from the section on feminist ethics of care, the discussion in this chapter is pragmatically oriented to reddit's location as a public space, the assumptions of privacy (or lack

thereof) of users posting on reddit, and a return to the politics of writing and working with verbatim quotes and actual usernames. This section should help inform the thinking of others considering these complex issues in their own research.

The practical (meaning rooted in the actual things I did, rather than the theoretical underpinnings of them) portion of the chapter discusses how, when, and why data were collected for this research. It discusses the long-term involvement with /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, as well as the systematic capture of threads, and the interplay of the two kinds of data generation and analysis. This section provides additional context to inform the methodological sections that are presented in the manuscript chapters (chapters 5, 6, and 7), and explores the decision making processes that were involved in the collection and analysis strategies used. It also explores successful and unsuccessful technologies used to help collect, analyse, and write up the data from this research; a set of processes that included failures, re-starts, and disappointments.

Last, the chapter discusses why this research is trustworthy, and along with exploring the concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research and writing, it demonstrates how I measure my own research relative to these concepts. Important in this discussion is whether the work is theoretically grounded, and uses that foundation to make claims that hold up to scrutiny and critical examination. I believe that it does.

The chapters that follow present the empirical, theoretical (supported by the empirical data), and meta-theoretical outcomes of this research project. These three chapters are not the only outcomes of this research, and represent only a small portion of the data and theorisation that has been generated by my work (see Cousineau, 2021c, for one example of work informed by this research but not included here). However, what follows is one manifestation of this work and contains questions about masculinity, reddit's affordances in promoting movement toward the political right, and questions about doing digitally mediated research that should inform and challenge you.

5 : "Entitled to everything responsible for nothing:" Gendered Discourses of Antifeminism, Biological Determinism, and Violence in Two Communities of Reddit's Manosphere

Introduction[81]

> I know plenty of feminists that say they care and that only the crazy feminists act this way but then they turn around and if a man inconveniences them it's suddenly an act of oppression and its back to not giving a shit about men. Mens rights is seen by many as a hate group when all men want is equality but the second we ask for that we are hated on and shunned while being told that we need to check our privilege. Yes our privilege of higher suicide rates, our privilege of going off and dying for the country, our privilege of waiting on the sinking ship as the women are pulled to safety, our privilege of watching our children being given to the mother if there is a divorce. Yes we should check those privileges and be thankful for what as soon as feminists start caring in the high ups we arent going to progress at all. (/u/DuPhuc, 2020)

These words by /u/DuPhuc[82], a user in the www.reddit.com/r/MensRights community, are buried several layers deep in the comments on a thread[83] about circumcision. Circumcision, and in particular the circumcision of infant boys, is an important issue within parts of the Men's Rights community; they see it as a violation of rights and bodily autonomy. The passion on display in the multi-layered discussion in this thread is telling of the community's feelings. The thread has over 600 individual comments and is, like the post above, a microcosm of the broader discussion in this community. While the parent post for this thread is about the circumcision of infant boys

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[81] N.B. Usernames, as well as spelling and grammar in direct quotations, used throughout the manuscript are verbatim from reddit. Misspellings, word confusion, grammatical errors, etc., are not marked with [*sic*] as there are too many. I will also acknowledge the tensions inherent in using verbatim quotes and usernames from my data in this manuscript. While there are arguments for the obfuscation or humanization of the individuals behind the data in qualitative work (Denzin & Giardina, 2019), in this case the inclusion of this information (as-is) is important as it situates the data and the users in the hybridised space of digital quasi-anonymity (Van der Nagel & Frith, 2015) where they are generated.

[82] The website reddit.com uses the designations /u/ and /r/ to differentiate between individual user pages (for example www.reddit.com/u/Here_Comes_The_King is the page for rapper Snoop Dogg) and communities (www.reddit.com/r/MensRights is the Men's Rights community page).

[83] Throughout this article I will use the following terminology: Post – an original text, link, image, or video posting that is open to comments; Comment – text and link content by users on specific posts; Parent & Child – parent comments are top-level and comment directly on the original post, child comments are replies to parent comments or replies to other child comments; Thread – the entirety of a single post and comments.

without consent, it takes only two comments for the discussion to turn to a critique of feminism. "I thought it was her body her choice, should it not be the same for men?" | "Don't tell a feminist that, because that's something the patriarchy does!" (/u/Ihavenopurposeinlifs & /u/HungryHornyHigh). Antifeminism is the root and lifeblood of /r/MensRights and the manosphere. The "evolving collection of blogs [*sic*] discussing topics of masculine interests and men's issues" called the manosphere is a loose assortment of ideologically connected groups dedicated to "understanding what it means to be a male in the 21st century, particularly in the face of a culture irrevocably changed by feminism" (Ironwood, 2013, p. 1).[84] While the manosphere is understood as existing mostly online, the various constituents of this loose grouping of independent communities are active both online and offline, have local and global concerns for the status of men and men's rights, and discuss issues between men as well as between men and 'others' – especially women.

This research focuses on two communities from the website reddit.com, /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, their discourses of masculinity, and how they situate themselves as ideological communities. These communities make up small parts of the larger manosphere, but were chosen because they are important models for the intersections of sex/gender systems, masculinities, and ideological variants of male supremacy that take place under the manosphere umbrella. Incorporating data from a digital ethnographic project this manuscript explores three gendered discursive practices employed by both /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. Examining user posts and community content, I situate these two groups' claims to antifeminism, fundamental differences between men and women, and the leveraging of violence (broadly understood), as ways of claiming particular masculinities unified within the manosphere but divergent between groups. The differences between community discourses of masculinity, as well as the ways they sanction men and critique feminism differently are significant in helping to understand the diverse appeal of the expanding manosphere. The following section briefly describes the manosphere, reddit, and their interconnectedness, followed by how masculinity is manifest within these spaces. After that, a description of the methodological approach to the ethnographic project frames the research findings/discussion section. This work illustrates how

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[84] Ian Ironwood is the pen name of the anonymous author of *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity*, a pro-manosphere and Red Pill book intended to provide support and credible content on the history, development, and ideology of the manosphere. The publisher is listed as Red Pill Press, but this book does not appear on their website.

the (re)production of masculinity, constructed relative to women and/or the feminized 'other' through the three areas listed above, and via the sanctioning of non-conforming men, helps maintain fuzzy boundaries of doing male supremacy online.

The Manosphere

The manosphere has been described in a variety of ways, including Ironwood's (2013) "dirty snowball," Gotell and Dutton's (2016) "cyber-world of men's rights," Van Valkenburgh's (2021) "loosely connected group of anti-feminist Internet communities," Ging's (2019b) "loose confederacy of interest groups," Wright's (2020) "digital manifestation of the Men's Liberation Movement," and Cousineau's (2021a) hub and spike visual metaphor (think COVID-19 coronavirus). No matter how you choose to conceptualize the manosphere, each constituent group shares the core belief that feminism has changed law, society, and personal relations to the detriment of men and men's interests/rights. Beyond that core, manosphere groups shoot off in different directions of focus, attention, and levels of militancy/potential violence (Ging, 2019b; Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

Understanding the genealogy of the manosphere as it relates to feminism, particularly through the "second wave," is important to help contextualize its social significance today. Covered in detail elsewhere (Ging, 2019b; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018), all of the sub-communities that make up the manosphere have roots in college-age men engaging with the Women's Liberation Movement (J. Fox, 2004; Kipnis, 1995; Messner, 1998). Some of these young men were disillusioned by what they saw as a lack of recognition and agitation on behalf of the ways that men were also negatively affected by the social structures critiqued by the feminism of the time. This disillusionment caused them to split from other pro-feminist male allies of the women's movement, and form the early men's movement (Messner, 2016). These young men, thinkers, and writers actualized the concepts and theoretical positions of the feminist movement to think about the ecology of men's social roles, and critiqued what they saw as significant blind spots in feminism (Farrell, 1975, 1996; Fasteau, 1974; Goldberg, 1976). These critiques, evolved and bastardised over time, form the core of men's movement groups today.

Reddit

Reddit is a social media[85] site that "bridges communities and individuals with ideas, the latest digital trends, and breaking news (...okay, and maybe cats)" (Reddit.com, 2016). Reddit serves primarily as a content aggregator, and the broader reddit community is divided into over 2 million unique topic-oriented sub-communities, called subreddits.[86] Reddit has five key elements that contribute to its ongoing success as a platform, including: (1) Users produce all content (beyond ads and announcements); (2) Users curate what content they view through community-based subscriptions; (3) Users can vote (positively or negatively) on site content[87], and these votes determine post visibility and reddit user points, called "Karma"; (4) All content on the site supports asynchronous Bulletin Board System (BBS)-style comment threads; and (5) Users can use the site quasi-anonymously, only revealing information they choose through posts and comments (Cousineau, 2021a).

Each sub-community is moderated by volunteer members selected from willing participants of that same community. Although these individuals are charged with upholding reddit-wide content and anti-harassment policies, moderators are (mostly) free to enforce those rules as they choose within their own communities (Marwick, 2017; Massanari, 2015). Users populate their feeds with subreddits of their choosing, and can create collections of content that are personalized to their interests and/or ideological persuasion (Pariser, 2011).

Reddit was designed as a discursive space (Ohanian, 2016), as the combination of posting, voting, and commenting encourages both positive and negative commentary (Couldry, 2003; Massanari, 2015). The blend of socialization, discussion, personal expression, and like-minded community members creates communities of discourse, or what Papacharissi (2015) describes as affective publics. Ging (2019a) explains that affective publics are "communities, which are discursively linked through storytelling, in the sense that their members become affectively attuned to and invested in political issues through processes of personal and emotional involvement and empathy" (p. 49). So, users who engage actively with subreddit

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[85] Social media as it is used in this paper is based on definitions synthesized by Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011), but this definition is contested, as is reddit's place as 'social media'. Although calling reddit social media can be troublesome, I do purposefully to better situate the website for the reader.

[86] Subreddits host content of all kinds, from the very broad and diverse (reddit.com/r/funny – almost anything "funny") to the very specific (reddit.com/r/ BeansInThings – about beans in things).

[87] There are some exceptions to this rule, as users can be banned from posting or voting on content from a given subreddit if they are found to be in violation of the community rules of that sub-community.

communities are likely to internalize underlying group politics and express a deep emotional connection to subreddit content, ideology, and personal identities (Lajoie, 2019). While this can be positive and generative, such as in Lajoie's (2019) exploration of /r/gaymers, it also permits the formation of communities of discourse for far-right, counterfactual, and (sometimes) hateful groups (Cousineau, 2021a; Salazar, 2018).

The Manosphere on Reddit

The manosphere, as it is manifest on reddit, is a collection of subreddits, sharing some ideological standpoints and diversifying on others.[88] Beyond an antifeminist core, these communities act as distinct entities with distinct foci, and ways of actualizing their ideologies. This paper highlights how two of these communities, /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, engage similarly and differently with anti-feminism, gendered difference, and violence as intra/inter-gender processes, constructions of masculinity, and discursive practices.

/r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill

/r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill were chosen as study sites because they provide different, but sometimes linked, community examples from within the manosphere. Both are focused on masculinity and male power, and both are particularly concerned with the role that feminism has played (and continues to play) in (re)defining social order – but they approach these issues in very different ways (DeCook, 2019). These communities are not the most extreme, militant, or violent of the manosphere communities on reddit (see Kini, 2017; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020, for discussion on violent incels, for example), but they do occupy two different ideological positions around men and masculinity, men's social position, and what a "good man" should be.

/r/MensRights - www.reddit.com/r/MensRights. /r/MensRights positions itself as a place for discussion about "any issue that pertains to men's relationship to society" and how "men's rights are influenced by how men are perceived by others" (r/MensRights, 2019 - About Community). Created in March 2008, there are over 304,000 members as of June 8, 2021. This community is a complex interplay of voices and goals that generates diverse opinions and

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[88] These subreddits include those that are ideologically aligned (like, for example, /r/TheRedPill (quarantined), /r/asktrp, /r/marriedredpill, /r/TRP (private), /r/redpillbooks, /r/RedPillWives, /r/RedPillWomen, and /r/RedPillWorkplace), and those that stand alone (like /r/MGTOW (quarantined), /r/incels (banned), or /r/braincels (banned)), as well as a huge number of others, including but not limited to: /r/seduction, /r/pickup, /r/pickupartists, /r/maledatingstrategy, , /r/MensRights, /r/MensRightsMeta.

approaches to a variety of issues that affect men. These include but are not limited to: domestic violence perpetrated against men; social perils that disproportionately affect men (including homelessness, suicide, violence, and early death; educational and employment prejudice); and the negative social influence of feminism. With a stated goal of "true" equality in societies, the part of the manosphere manifest in /r/MensRights sees the world as feminist-controlled social and legal systems that are stacked against men and their general wellbeing; women are *not* a subordinated class. Posts and threads are mostly commentaries and discussions on media content linked from outside of reddit (for example: online news articles, screen captures from social media, or YouTube content), and based primarily in western democracies (especially Australia, North America, and the UK), but there are also users from other regions, including a regular presence from the Indian sub-continent. Interactions between users are mostly civil, if not outright positive and supportive, and when users do disagree, exchanges can be long and explanatory, rather than short and aggressive. Rarely do disagreements degenerate into intra-group fighting, and when this happens it is often policed from within. Threads generally redirect discussion at some point to cultural misandry or general anti-feminism, as evidenced by the sample post from the introduction.

/r/TheRedPill - www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill. With the tag line "Discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men" (/r/TheRedPill, 2019), /r/TheRedPill "packages itself as a group that helps men successfully engage in sexual and romantic relationships with the added benefit of reclaiming one's manhood" (DeCook, 2019, para. 5). However, the group, the sexual strategies they profess, and their socio-cultural perspectives on women and women's roles are distinctly misogynistic, entrenched in a Western traditionalism about sex and gender, and borderline White supremacist (Cousineau, 2021c; Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019; Mountford, 2018). This subreddit was created in October 2012 and was quarantined by reddit in 2018 for violations to the new reddit code of conduct.[89] At the time of quarantine, the community had over 292,000 subscribers, and in June 2019 that number had climbed to just over 400,000.[90] Content in this community is dominated by personal stories,

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[89] For discussions on the implications of reddit quarantines of sub-communities please refer to (Carlson & Cousineau, 2020; Chandrasekharan et al., 2020; Myers West, 2018; Ullmann & Tomalin, 2020).
[90] Acurate numbers are not available after October 2018 as reddit blocks users from seeing member numbers of quarantined subreddits. Viewing the community in an outdated version of the reddit platform (old.reddit.com) shows over 1.7 million members, but this number is unreliable.

links to blog posts, and links to other Red Pill content (YouTube videos, etc.), focused on the development of successful (Alpha) masculinity. Other forms of masculinity and ways of being are denigrated as sub-optimal, and the rhetoric around the development of alpha characteristics is deeply individualistic and meritocratic. Significant factors in the development of alpha characteristics are money and physical stature, and although the community has a space for those willing to "work on themselves", there is a clear ideal that men should be working to approach – even when that is physically or socio-culturally impossible.[91] While conversation and content is generally supportive of those looking to learn or develop Red Pill standpoints, this support is often couched in a kind of denigrating encouragement that is meant to push the user in a certain direction by highlighting non-alpha behavior – a kind of intra-male negging[92] (Green et al., 2017) (for example: "if you are a beta, you will not be able to realise that she is manipulating you" (/u/Project_Zero_Betas, 2020). Dominance over women is a significant pillar of Red Pill ideology, and "their understanding of male-female relationships is imbricated with ideologies of male supremacism" (Cousineau, 2021a, p. 7).

Masculinity

Concepts of masculinity, or rather the (re)presentation of masculinity, are an important point of both unification and divergence within the manosphere. While all sub-groups within the loose collective are rooted in being "men" (with the exception, of course, of those small subgroups that are dedicated to women supporters of manosphere ideologies and manosphere men – for example: /r/redpillwives), what it means to "be a man" and the (re)presentational dynamics of that embodiment vary considerably. The masculinity of misogynist incels (short for *in*voluntary *cel*ibates) has been discussed at length in popular and academic writing (Basu, 2020; Ging, 2019b; Reeve, 2018; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020; Spampinato, 2018; Stokes, 2018), owing to the fact that self-declared incels have been the perpetrators in high profile mass killings in Canada and the USA (BBC News, 2018; Isai et al., 2018). Misogynist incel masculinity is complex. It leverages the power of men and masculinity in a patriarchal society, but men who identify as incels occupy a subordinated class where their 'right' to (heterosexual) sex has been taken away. They are the privileged and the oppressed simultaneously (Ging, 2019b). The masculinity of

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[91] For example, the alpha is tall, rich, powerful, and charismatic. If you are short, you cannot make yourself grow, and no amount of work, education, or self-sacrifice will guarantee monetary success in neoliberal capitalist society.
[92] Negging is the purposeful lowering of a woman's (or man's) self-esteem to increase perceived attractiveness of the assailant in order to achieve sexual conquest or make some other gain (Green et al., 2017).

misogynist incels offers a good frame of reference to understand some of the differences in how masculinity is manifest between /r/TheRedPill and /r/MensRights, as the former follows a more hierarchical understanding of masculinity and men than the latter.

In /r/TheRedPill, the organization of masculinity is at the same time straightforward and complex, insofar as there is an ideal masculinity that men should work to embody (Alpha), and there is a collective of "other" men (the non-Alpha, often simply lumped together as 'Beta' men, although other categories exist), but the dividing lines can be fuzzy. The alpha-beta dichotomy has roots in the Red Pill adherence to a discourse of applied evolutionary psychology, where women are genetically and evolutionarily predisposed to be attracted to one kind of man to supply "good genes" for offspring, but another kind of man to support and nurture those offspring over time – the "Alpha Fucks/Beta Bucks" principle outlined in their foundational materials (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). The traditional alpha in /r/TheRedPill, I argue, maps onto a passé form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) that projects backwards to an ideal of western traditionalism. The notion that the hegemonic form of /r/TheRedPill is antiquated is important because it recognizes that the construct of the ideal man as malleable, contingent on cultural context (Messerschmidt, 2018), and that the ideal alpha may not represent a cultural ideal in this cultural moment.[93] /r/TheRedPill presents an approach to masculinity and "being a man" that rests on an intra-gender hierarchy of alpha and other men, resulting in a have/have not discourse that measures the value of the individual as a man through that hierarchy.

Masculinity is represented much more collectively in /r/MensRights. While there are men who will call on the derogatory language of betas and "simps" in an attempt to call out other men (/u/X-MrDude-X, 2020), largely the collective acts as a (mostly) unified entity representing men more broadly –with one significant exception. The anti-feminism that is so central to the identity of the men's rights space and its members, overshadows this male collectivism and men who identify as feminists are universally derided and chastised within the group. The division of men and masculinity within /r/MensRights is not contingent, then, on the performance of a hegemonic masculinity, but rather on the recognition that women are *not* the subordinated class they are accepted to be in Western society – men are. Those who have yet to come to the realisation that

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[93] For one example of this, see *"The alpha spectrum is huge"* (/u/javiercer20, 2020)

men are the subordinated class in society,[94] are a kind of unfortunate victim, unable to realise their full potential as men because of their adherence to a social order that oppresses them – masculinity contingent on ideology.

Methodology

The work described in this paper is part of research exploring the discourses of masculinity embedded in the /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill communities. Employing digital ethnographic methods and analysis I explore what discourses of masculinity, affirmation, and defence were engaged by members of these men's communities. Along with long-term observation in both groups, I collected data systematically during a set period; March through June 2020. This section briefly discusses the methods used in the study, as well as the implication of those methods on the data collected.

Digital ethnographic methods

The research explored in this paper uses two types of digital ethnographic data collection through the building of a systematically collected data set, and long-term researcher involvement in the research communities embedded as a listener (De Seta, 2020; Molina, 2017). The more straightforward is a data set constructed through the systematic imaging and collection of post data from the /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill subreddit communities. Developed as a type of "data ritual" (Kozinets, 2019), this collection occurred over the course of three months, and the five most popular (sorted by "hot") and five most controversial (sorted by "controversial") posts in each community were captured as images three times each week. This yielded an average of 125 unique posts per category, owing to duplicates between data collection days – especially in the posts sorted "controversial." These posts had an average of 46 comments per post, yielding a large and diverse data set of user posts and commentaries with over 23,000 individual user posts and comments. The imaging of posts and comments was done to preserve them visually as they appeared on the site at the time of data harvesting. This decision was purposeful as the experience of online communities is too easily essentialized to the textual (or posted image)

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[94] The language of being 'pilled' is common across manosphere groups to represent the realisation that men are subordinated in Western society. This language is near ubiquitous across groups, and is meant to evoke the imagery of Neo from the movie *The Matrix* taking the red pill and waking up from the simulation to the reality of the world (DeCook, 2019; Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019; Ging, 2019b; C. Jones et al., 2020; Read, 2019). I used the long-form description here to avoid confusion between the use of the pill metaphor relative to /r/TheRedPill and the more general use of the term as it might have found a place in this sentence.

products of community participants (Pearce et al., 2020), and lacks attention to the ways the online space itself can influence the labour of the participant while engaging with the website's content (Light et al., 2018). In the case of reddit, this type of whole-page imaging allows for the preservation of the (sometimes) complex conversations that are happening asynchronously, but also in real time, creating a messy landscape of parent and child comments that sometimes require the reader to re-visit prior comments and reacquaint themselves with the source topic area (for an example of this, see figure 5-1).
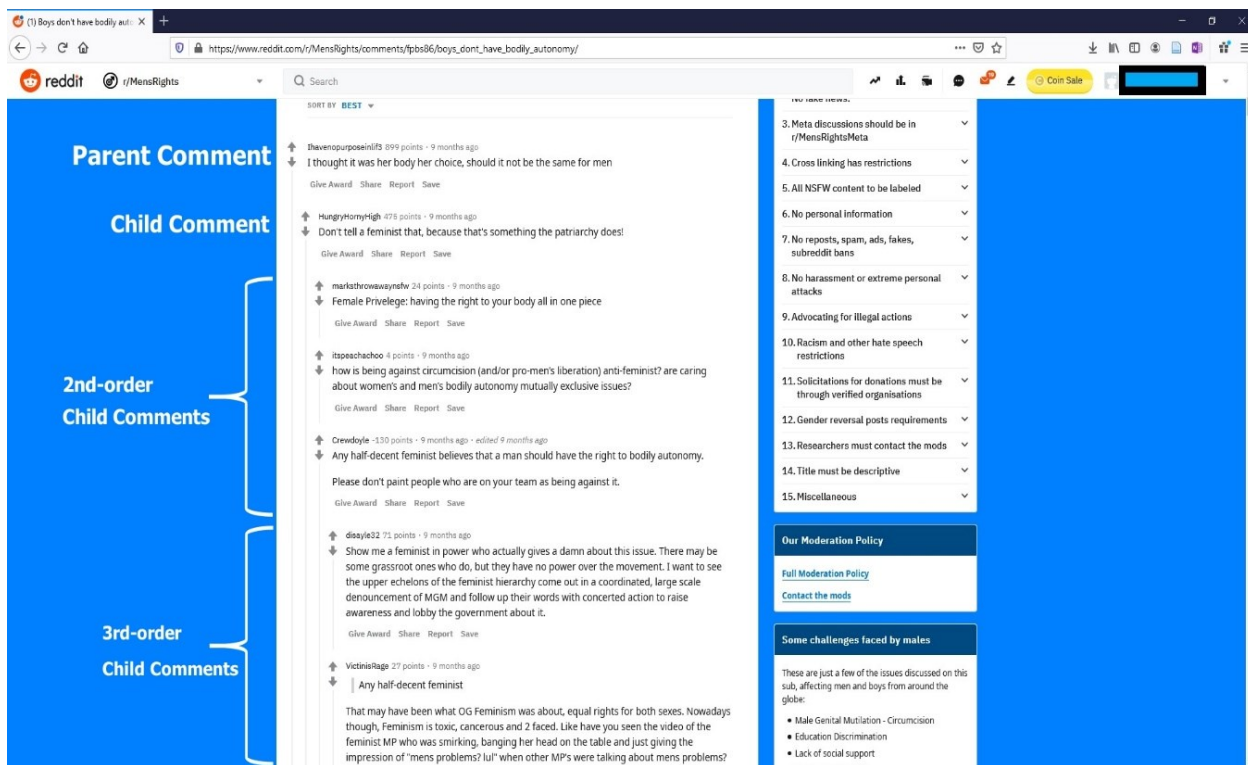
Figure 5-1: Screenshot of /r/MensRights thread showing parent-child comment threading, December 31, 2020.

The secondary mode of data collection requires long-term involvement in the communities studied, and I chose to be involved as an "eager participant-lurker" (De Seta, 2020). De Seta uses Beaulieu's (2004) exploration of the idea of internet researcher's developing intersubjectivity as a way to situate the epistemological decision to observe (lurk in) online communities without the need to "get the seats of our pants dirty" as prescribed by early internet-community researchers (Paccagnella, 1997). Purposefully situating oneself in this way, De Seta (2020) argues, can be a better representation of the real experience of participants in large online communities, as the majority of users are lurkers rather than regularly active participants/posters, and it serves to challenge the "false choice between naturalist lurking and active involvement"

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(p. 88). Outside of the systematic data collection window, I have been a participant-lurker in both communities for over three years, with a passive but persistent interest in community discussion and action over that time. This personal and intentional involvement in the communities studied is reflexive of a more contemporary approach to ethnographic study, where the researcher can (and perhaps should) be familiar with the community they choose to study (Kanuha, 2000). Not only does this permit a kind of long-term understanding of the ebbs and flows of the communities, it better positions the researcher to see and understand in-group dynamics, outliers, or how the community might be shifting during any given window of systematic data collection and analysis (Danley, 2021; Kanuha, 2000). For example, during my research, reddit has introduced three significant (and many minor) changes to its policies on abuse and harassment, resulting in changes in subreddit rules to prevent /r/TheRedPill from being banned and deplatformed.

Analysis

Each post was reviewed, reading the text provided by the poster, following any major link provided, and/or watching any media that was included as part of the post (this included YouTube videos, news articles, blog posts, and links to other websites). After this, I read the top three parent comments and using the information from the post and those comments began to form a basic thematic structure to the arguments being made in the post. I then read through all the comments sequentially, as they were presented in the thread. This means that the sub-threads formed under each parent comment in the post were read in their entirety before moving onto the next parent comment. After the first 25 posts were reviewed, I made a list of the significant themes that emerged from the posts and threads. For example, this early list for /r/MensRights included: anti-feminism; base arguments for the community; solidarity; domestic violence; relationships; body issues; masculinity; and cultural bias. As analysis progressed, these initial themes were expanded, contracted, separated, and augmented with comments and thematic content from comments throughout the set of empirical materials. Broader discourses began to emerge, including broad adherence to the politics of the right, male superiority, questioning of women's (especially feminists') rationality and intelligence, and meritocratic neoliberal understandings of work and personal value.

Analysis in ethnographic work is ongoing, as the experiences of the researcher as part of the community, or in the space of the community, are always already part of the data and

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interpretation of that data (Gullion, 2018). The user experience as the lurker/researcher is essential to help contextualize the data from systematic collection, as the broader and long-term exposure to the community provides a different kind of analysis. The analysis is also subject to the theoretical and subject orientations of the researcher, in that the researcher's positionality is essential to the way that the community and data are approached, understood, and represented (Gullion, 2018). For example, as a researcher I have a social justice orientation and employ feminist theory and methodologies to foreground gender and other power inequities in my work. These orientations are always already embedded within the research designs and projects that I undertake, and necessarily influence the research questions asked, as well as the ways that I interpret and represent the findings. As a researcher the tensions I face when interacting with contentious, anti-feminist communities, means it is often difficult to consider these men's arguments without the shadow of right-of-center politics and male supremacist undercurrents. While it is impossible to separate the researcher's positionality and politics with the research content, it is incumbent on the researcher to do the intellectual labour of investigating how deeply and inextricably linked individual arguments are from the dominant community ideological perspective (Atkinson et al., 2008). Within some communities, like /r/MensRights, the arguments of individual users sometimes put them in opposition to the avowed antifeminist stance of the group (and manosphere). This complexity is important in understanding the deeper meaning of the group's ideology and participant involvement.

Claims and Models of Masculinity

Discussing how men and men's issues are perceived in society and/or lamenting a social order that lacks a positive identity for men seem like laudable goals, but even the brief overviews of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill should cause you to second guess the intentionality of those community purpose statements. They do, with a little contextual examination, demonstrate the ways that these two communities seek to situate masculinity in certain ways, including but not limited to: expressed and pervasive antifeminism, the presupposition that men and women are fundamentally different, and the use of violence (as a concept and potential action). The remainder of this paper explores each of these themes as they manifest within these two communities.

The Antifeminist Nucleus

Antifeminism is what forms the core of the manosphere – it is the one ideological underpinning that unites the confederacy. Because of this, it is embedded in all discursive and doctrinal elements of the manosphere's constituent groups, and /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are no exceptions. Feminism, as perceived by the members of these groups, is a global phenomenon with local and specific implications for their lives, meaning that the men who come together and meet in these communities have shared concerns, but occupy divergent legal and political jurisdictions. What they find in these reddit communities, then, is a way to come together under group-specific anti-feminist rhetoric, and find support. This creates a kind of fraternal, or homosocial, support structure for personal and local action that has global reach (Archambault & Veilleux-Lepage, 2019); and the kinds of communities (or third places)[95] that are so important to the formation of ingroup leisure spaces with strong participant identification (Camp & Dunlap, 2020; McKeown, 2020; Robinson & Holt, 2020). In both communities, anti-feminism is framed by a *man versus feminism* (or *feminism against all men*) approach that is imbricated with the ideals of masculinity discussed above. "Feminism is not about equality. Its about female supremacy. They just say its about equality to cover that up. Hell, probably to them, female supremacy is equality" (u/tiredfromlife2019 – April 18, 2020). Alongside this is an intergender animosity for women (via feminism) that is expressed using pejorative language, and a blame cycle that brings many, if not all, socio-cultural complaints from these groups back to feminism as its starting point.

The man versus feminism approach of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill is essential to helping us understand how the foundational elements of their worldviews extend from a neo-traditional view of masculinity – in particular the need to assert power (C. W. Johnson & Cousineau, 2018). Power in this context is deeply individual, and although these users are part of a community of support, they tend to speak in ways that isolate and individualize. The men in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill assume an individualistic/meritocratic worldview, and purposefully contrast that with a collectivist (social justice[96]) worldview taken up by feminists.

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[95] Oldenberg (1999) described third places (outside of home (first) and work (second) places) as welcoming and beneficial to the individual and community. For more thorough discussion see Oldenberg (1999) or Camp and Dunlap (2020) for a more contemporary take.

[96] Importantly, the term social justice, in the sense that the men in these groups are using it, is entirely pejorative and in the context of the social justice warrior memology (Massanari & Chess, 2018).

What is at issue for the members of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill is that they perceive 'modern' feminists as a single collective focused on the desire and ability of women to live off the production, capital, and progress produced by men – "The whole point of feminism is simple / Entitled to everything responsible for nothing" (u/benderXX – April 21, 2020). It stands, then, in opposition to the meritocratic value system these men understand that underpins their socio-cultural systems and the ways they understand 'right' and 'wrong' ways of doing things -

> I don't think winning is masculine or femenine, they are different approaches and tools that can be used for winning. For example, winning by burocratic means like a disqualification is a femenine way to win. I think masculinity is about the self and femeninity is about the others/society. Winning by your own merit, intelect, strength, wealth, etc. VS manipulation of values and perception, hiding behind rules or bending them, shaming, etc. (/u/Quesomanchegoo – March 21, 2020)

The 'right' way of being and doing things is firmly rooted in individualistic, merit-base value systems where the ability to achieve "on your own merits" and "work hard" equate to success in society, regardless of gender. This belief is on display in discussions of workplace achievement, and especially any discussion of a wage gap between men and women, immediately claimed to be a feminist falsehood.

> Toxic feminists promote the pay gap myth as a way to absolve women of responsiblilty … the toxic feminists just stop at 'pay gap' because finding out the reasons for it would undercut thier agenda. Instead they jump into thousands of homes and just say 'oppression' is the reason. (/u/Seeken619 – April 1, 2020)

A post by /u/Anonymous74829572010 ("A question on my final exam on management class," 2020) does a good job of illustrating how the community approaches discussions on the idea of a wage gap through their neoliberal and meritocratic understanding of capitalist systems. The post is a screen capture of an online test question asking, "How many cents per dollar do women earn compared to men?" and gives 4 multiple-choice options between 50 and 80 cents. The problematic structure of the question notwithstanding, the members of /r/MensRights who comment on the post do two things: express their hatred for feminism: "Feminism is cancer and this post is an example" (/u/Mens_rights_matter2); and attack the idea of a wage gap by talking about personal choices, or stating some variety of 'that's not how capitalism works'. In this

thread one commenter explains that the question is not actually problematic at all, since the issue is about earnings, not about pay, "It's true. They used the word "earn". There is an earnings gap, due to men and women making different choices" (/u/mikesteane). This is one way that members of /r/MensRights rationalize the issue of wage disparity, giving it roots in women choosing lower earning fields and professions, without consideration of the deep socio-political and economic structures that reward "women's" work less than "men's" work (e.g. care work vs. tech sector) (Fortin et al., 2017).

The users' arguments about the reward for and value of work take a few forms, and in the following post by /u/CristiVasile2000 two of them appear: "How many WORKED HOURS women do compared with men? Surprise, is less than 77%!!". The first argument in /u/CristiVasile2000's comment is straightforward, value should be calculated based on hours worked. Men, on average they argue, work more hours than women, are therefore more valuable in the (capitalist and neoliberal) economic system, and should make more money as a result. Rarely do discussions about hours worked overlap with type of work, what kind of work is compensated, or the discourses of masculinity and femininity that hang over different types of work and their associated compensation rates regardless of hours worked. The second is a bit more nuanced, as it assumes that a rational economic system under capitalism would not allow someone to be compensated at a higher rate for the same work. This argument concludes that, where all other things are equal between men and women in terms of productivity and employee 'value,' that businesses would only hire women if they could. Under the presumed 'gender pay gap' say the /r/MensRights users, they could get the same outcomes for less money: "So any good manager would only hire women, to save costs" (/u/a-man-from-earth). The insinuation is that if women are paid less, it is because they either work fewer hours (as stated above), or, that there are other determinants that lower women's production or make it less valuable. This gives away the community's individualistic, neoliberal, and capitalist worldview in important ways, and is explored further below.

While the anti-feminism is obvious in some parts of this post, it is more subtle in its critiques of the idea of a wage gap. These critiques are rooted in the neoliberal supposition that economic forces are rational and predictable, and the constituent factors that make up labour market participation and earnings are straightforward and logical (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009; Cornwall, 2016). They ignore, for example, family and care work as contributors to economies,

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as well as the historical devaluation of these kinds of work even when they are part of the paid-work economy (for example: daycare workers, personal support workers, and teachers in some jurisdictions) (Diekman et al., 2010). By ignoring these important elements, they also ignore the extensive feminist scholarship, theorization, and activist work that has been done to illuminate these issues with the intention of creating social change. Users in /r/MensRights demonstrate a foundational ethos of Western traditionalism around gendered work, roles, compensation, and power. The ideological positioning of choice in determining individual social and economic status comes from that same narrow traditionalism and is a familiar refrain from those who perceive their own power diminished by gains made by 'others'.

/r/TheRedPill, for their part, lament feminism in similar ways, but also go so far as to dismiss feminism altogether. In some cases, feminism is not viewed as a social movement for equality at all, but rather a test of men's resolves to maintain the patriarchy.

> Just so you know, our society isn't run by women. This is a patriarchy and it's going to stay that way. It's going to stay that way because it's what we (men) want. And it's going to stay that way because it's what women want. You just think they don't because you misunderstand feminism. You think feminism is women wanting to dominate men. It's not. It's just another shit test, but on a macroscopic scale. (/u/Sonny_Luna – May 31, 2020)

> It's up to men to step up and reclaim their masculinity, and enforce standards and boundaries, or allow their society to be taken over down the road by a stronger tribe where masculinity is still valued. Well. if that sounds too much to you, I should just let you know that this has been how men always went about doing it throughout history. It is just this generation of men that would rather be society's victim than the creators of societies and nations. (/u/SKRedPill – March 8, 2020)

> Their language is deceptive by nature. Most men say what they mean. Women do not. Then they put you through a shit test in her mind it's the right thing to do when in reality it doesn't mean anything. I have seen women shame men and embarrass them on the job. And it's always like fake adversity women put men through. (/u/Mouse1701, May 24, 2020)

Contrast the more nuanced ideas from /r/MensRights with the overt claims to gendered power and the correctness of male supremacy from /r/TheRedPill, and we can see the insidiousness of shared and diverse antifeminism.

Men ≠ Women: fundamentally different beings

The depth and toxicity of the antifeminism displayed by the users in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are indicative of anger and resentment at the perceived loss of power by men in Western society. It also demonstrates a politics of difference through the assumption of fundamental differences between men and women. The idea of fundamental difference takes several forms, each meant to separate men from women as a way of advocating male supremacy. The male supremacist advocacy is direct and overt through /r/TheRedPill, but is more subtle in /r/MensRights. In both communities the idea is couched in a biological determinism rooted in evolutionary psychology and sex roles, themselves largely anchored in what Debbie Ging calls "pseudo-scientific self-help manuals on heterosexual gender roles and relations" (Ging, 2019a, p. 56).

The fundamental differences between men and women are foundational for /r/TheRedPill. /u/itiswr1tten provides a good example in the post "*TRP is Biology – Only the Truth Matters"* (2020). In this post, /u/itiswr1tten (a high-status contributor to the community) explains his interpretation of "the science of why biology instructs sex – and the conclusions about what biology defines to be male and female." In effect, /u/itiswr1tten tries to explain how human civilization is deeply rooted in sexual dimorphism and sexual strategies of men and women. He uses these ideas (attributed to evolutionary biologists Bret Weinstein and Heather Heying) to justify the ways that /r/TheRedPill men approach sexual relationships. As women have a singular set of needs, men choose to fulfill either the donation of "good" genes, or support child rearing – *alpha fucks/beta bucks* (see example in the text of this post online and snippet below re: AF/BB).

/u/itiswr1tten's post is but one example from /r/TheRedPill in this topic area, and all serve to confirm one or more of the series of dichotomies between men and women identified by Shawn Van Valkenburgh (2021) in the sidebar content of /r/TheRedPill. Van Valkenburgh points out that for adherents to the Red Pill, "The observable world is considered the only valid source of empirical data, the "objective" analysis of which informs [their] conclusions about human

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nature and society" (p. 7). For much of the writing on /r/TheRedPill little of that empirical data comes from scholarly research or pop-science, but rather from personal experience; 'seeing it for yourself.'

> The reality is that the core foundational material of TRP is very much based in biology. There is no need to fear biological determinism - understanding it will actually give you more freedom (thanks jojo this was a great point). What comes through goofy terms like AF/BB [Alpha Fucks/Beta Bucks] is in fact fully supported by the truth. Reject the lies where you see them, and you will see it for yourself. (/u/itiswr1tten, 2020, The Cure for Cancer - para. 5)

One of the many things missing from /r/TheRedPill's interpretation of reality and objective analysis through biological determinism, is any concept of personal or confirmatory bias (Auxier & Vitak, 2019; Tait, 2017). The members of this community, as they internalize these ideas of biological destiny (and its limitations) are unencumbered by the burden of having to consider the intersectional complexities of social order, race, power relationships, sex-gender systems (Crenshaw, 1990; G. Rubin, 2009), or even credible new science that challenges previous notions of evolutionary sex-roles (see Haas et al., 2020). Perhaps not coincidentally, and also unencumbered by rigorous interrogation, the biologically deterministic approach to human sexuality and reproductive behaviour also supports the Red Pill hierarchies between men – an example of the important intra-referential discourse that creates hierarchies between masculinities (Messerschmidt, 2018; R. Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016).

As with many things, the adherence to the concept of fundamental differences between men and women is somewhat more subtle in /r/MensRights, although no less important to the ideology of the group. For /r/MensRights, the expression of inherent biological differences is shrouded in anti-feminist critique where their comments about feminists apply to (almost) all women, "Thats exactty What the Problem with women especially feminists women are. What they say is exact the opposite from What they are doing. They say What is expected from them nothing more" (/u/Godudop, April 21, 2020). Feminists are a stand-in for women who make choices or hold beliefs that the men of /r/MensRights are unable to rationalize and this (over)generalization reveals, among other things, "a substantive knowledge gap about what feminism is/was" (Ging, 2019a, p. 52). Just like racism, the subtle sexism and male supremacism

can be far more effective and pervasive than overt forms (Foucault, 1979). The discourse on feminism in this subreddit is of particular importance because it is deeply gendered. The 'feminists' under scrutiny are always women (men who identify as feminists are always called "male feminists"), and the tone of posts and comments that reference them are (almost always) derisive.

> Women hating the fact that men are entering their spaces and as you can see these are feminists. The group I remind you who along with the rest of the left that called for the annihilation of male spaces and yet they can't handle men entering their spaces. Hypocrisy!
>
> Also. notice how a woman called said men losers and cucks. Didn't feminists say that men being cucks and lead by women were winners and stunning and brave?! (/u/tiredfromlife2019)

The anger at women, shrouded in critiques of feminism in /r/MensRights is complicated because women play several important roles in the ethos of the subreddit. Along with being the foil these men fight against, they are the object of sexual attraction, and supporters of the cause, so they must always occupy a multi-faceted role in the men's rights ideology.

Someone's Getting Hit Tonight: Violence as a Lever

When discussing violence in relation to /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, it is important to begin by stating that neither community condones violence outright. While it would be a step too far to claim that either group abhors violence, moderators and users police overt calls for violence quickly and efficiently. Although this may stem from increased monitoring by reddit after updating community conduct policies beginning in 2018 (the communities do not want to be banned), it makes the communities' use of violence in their discourses of masculinity and sociality more interesting. Where the use of antifeminism and understandings of male/female difference were similar, the ways that /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill discuss the subject of violence is quite different.

Discussions of violence, or at least male tendencies toward violence, fall in line with intra-masculine hierarchies and the biological determinism so important to the community ideology of /r/TheRedPill.

Friends who have proven themselves loyal to your and your development deserve to have you back them up when times get tough. Lovers who do everything to please you deserve to be led through the path of love, and protected by those who would harm them. A man who cannot defend those he loves with tribal violence is no man at all. Remember your masculinity - you are called upon to fight. (/u/LiveAFTSOV, 2020)

/u/LiveAFTSOV's statement is part of a very long post titled "*10 Virtues of Traditional & Sacred Masculinity*" and does a good job of elucidating both elements of Red Pill conceptualizations of violence: men's roles; and the embodiment of masculinity inherent in the actualization of violent behaviour. A Red Pill man should be willing and able to engage with violence. Rarely, however, do they call on men to engage with that (presumed) biologically engrained part of their existence. Instead, they discuss how to act violently is a part of male instinct – "It's also instinctual for a man to beat the shit out of another guy who has what he wants. It's also instinctual for a man to do a lot of things by force, rather than negotiation" (u/tyrryt – May 31, 2020), "Think about it, going back to our primal nature … Mother nature has blessed us with these predispositions for a reason, and the main reason was probably the ability to use said strength advantage in order to forcefully procreate (or what thr modern World now commonly refers to as the act of 'rape')" (/u/lilennui – May 31, 2020). These instincts, though, are softened, calmed, or outlawed by civilization; "But we lock those men in a cage and take everything away from them" (/u/tyrryt – May 31, 2020), "We have taken away the ability of men to exert control over women by taking away their natural power and making them weak both mentally and physically" (u/lilennui – May 31, 2020). The lamentations of some members of the community notwithstanding, the dominance and control linked to patriarchal masculinity are essential to the worldview of Red Pill ideology in that it justifies the male supremacism that anchors their worldview (DiBranco, 2020; Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

/r/MensRights discussions rarely, if ever, turn to the idea of a male predisposition to violence. Most interactions discussing violence within this community are focused on domestic violence, and in particular the ways that male victims of domestic violence are silenced, shamed, or mistreated. Social approaches to understanding and addressing domestic violence, treatment of women versus men in cases of accused domestic violence, and general existential malaise about men's victimhood are common refrains. While the men in this group lament all domestic violence, they are especially conscious of the ways they see domestic violence perpetrated by

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women as ignored or taken less seriously. The post "*Domestic violence towards male is not a serious matter to most of the people in the society*" (u/robinwrightmac, April 1, 2020), contains a meme showing a supposed victim of woman-perpetrated domestic violence. The comments that address the meme follow a pattern where the men call out how problematic the meme would be if it depicted a female victim, interspersed with comments explaining that the meme is itself a joke. For the men's rights advocates in the thread, the meme itself is problematic as it makes light of male victims of domestic partner violence, joke or not. The fact that some people can also find the meme funny is a kind of meta-problematic, where men are seen to have internalized the idea that a man being physically assaulted by his partner is humorous. In response to one such comment, the original poster responds "This is what I wanted to point out. Violence against male is so lightly taken that it is memeworthy. This shows the social hypocrisy like any thing." For /r/MensRights, violence, rather than being a mark of masculinity and male evolutionary status, is an example of how men are oppressed. This oppression is not, as we might conclude through feminist or social justice lensing, the oppressive structures of patriarchy, but rather via society predisposed to ignore male pain and victims. "I worry about my future as a male. It feels like my constitutional rights mean nothing and I have no true legal protection from anything." (/u/SharpGalaxy, 2020).

Discussions on violence are indicative of the ways internal discourses of masculinity within groups serve to police membership and enactments of "proper" manhood, and for /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill they are deeply divergent. Still, both communities use violence as a lever in their own way, with much of the violence (although not all) being targeted at men. Both groups use violence to justify their ideological standpoints about men in society, and functionalize discourses of masculinity and power to make their points.

Conclusion

Manosphere communities like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are complicated places. This paper has demonstrated that complexity by comparing their antifeminist thought and rhetoric, uncritical understandings of difference between men and women, and their conceptualizations of violence as an asset or mode of male oppression. These groups both stake claims to a piece of the manosphere They also create models of masculinity that are unique to them, but have things in common (Ging, 2019b). Both subscribe to neoliberal, meritocratic ideas about value and social

contribution (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). Both place men, through biological imperatives of control, sacrifice, or logic and rationality, as biologically superior (Gotell & Dutton, 2016). Both see feminism as a social ill that harms men and women, and has done significant damage to individuals and society (Mamié et al., 2021; Rothermel, 2020). Both advocate for male supremacy.

But these groups are also distinct. Where /r/TheRedPill sees violence as a part of "real men," calmed and contained by feminist power structures, /r/MensRights sees violence used against men as an important way that men are subordinated. /r/MensRights has space for (almost) all men, where /r/TheRedPill advocates for a specific kind of man and specific kind of "alpha" masculinity – where there are good alphas and bad betas.

> Give up the "beta ways" and they will stick around longer. Women want a dominant man. She should be proving herself to him and he should reward her when she acts in a way that benefits him and withdraw attention when she doesn't. Turn the tables around and shower her with undeserved affection and she will perceive herself to have more value than him, and it's Checkmate. (/u/GlobalAsshat – May 25, 2020)

Through their discourses of masculinity, both /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill cast a figure of ideal manhood that necessarily (whether inadvertent or explicit) sanctions other men. While critiquing feminism, masculinity is policed via group ideological standpoints (Malin, 2010), subordinating some men within groups that say they focus on the collective rights and/or biological imperatives of all men.

These similarities, differences, and unique places within the manosphere are important because they represent a large (and growing) segment of the population (Forscher & Kteily, 2020). As we face increased right-wing populism around the world, the permissive political spaces created by that infiltration into mainstream politics allow these groups to flourish (Aharoni & Féron, 2020; Boehme & Isom Scott, 2020). Manosphere groups become, then, manifestations of masculinity politics that thread masculinity and male supremacy into conventional political discussion with the intent of challenging established social narratives. They do this primarily through affective publics, having members invest time, personal capacity, and emotional capital in the ideological aims of the group, but also through the affordances of platforms like reddit that create spaces with little oversight where far-right ideology and

pipelines toward extremism can take root (Cousineau, 2021a; Munn, 2019). They also do the work of policing dissent and shaping certain types of masculine ideology.

The expansion of these groups threatens equity work in all areas, especially gender equity, and should give us pause as we consider our social and gendered futures – especially in Western democracies. The election of Donald Trump, and the subsequent surge of white, male, and Christian supremacist actions (for example: The Soldiers of Odin in Scandinavia, Canada, and Australia)[97] are significant examples of the possible harms that continued exposure of these ideologies can have on people and social structures. Continued study of elements of the manosphere, especially in locations like reddit, is essential to better understanding and working against the regressive ideological standpoints of these groups. Further work situating these groups on the far and alt-right spectrum of political activity, as well as drawing lines between the dissolution of traditional fraternal organizations and the rise of these homosocial/fraternal extremist groups is important work to be done. This research does some of that work and should serve as a call to explore content more deeply, as well as examine manosphere rhetoric more closely to help slow the spread — "members of the so-called 'manosphere' pioneered harassment techniques that are now leveraged not only by individuals and online communities, but by governments and other state actors" (Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

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[97] The Soldiers of Odin are a paramilitary fraternal organization, founded in Finland in 2015 (2016 in Canada) that describes itself as "a patriotic street patrol organization, which opposes harmful immigration, Islamization, and globalization, and aims at tackling the by-products caused by the aforementioned problems, like weakening of the security" (Kotonen, 2019, p. 241) That has faced "accusations of racism, neo-Nazism, and white supremacism, due both to the group's anti-immigrant, anti-Islam stances, and the composition of its membership" (Archambault & Veilleux-Lepage, 2019, p. 273).

6 : "A Positive Identity for Men"? Pathways to far-right participation through /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill[98]

Far right[99] ideologies defend particular conceptualizations of masculinity[100] and male power, embedded in a certain type of Western traditionalism (Cornwall et al., 2016; Pai, 2016). When we think of the far-right, most people imagine neo-Nazis, White Nationalists/White Separatists, or the militia-focused second amendment enthusiasts in the United States: mostly White, sometimes armed, confrontational. Far-right groups are each of these things, and while women make up a small percentage of participants in their political and public activities (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 2006), these groups are mostly men (Ebner & Davey, 2019; Gordon, 2018). Far and alt-right communities have rooted and flourished online, and among them "men's rights" groups have been particularly successful in community building and expansion (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2019; A. Kelly, 2017; Munn, 2019). Using men's rights groups as a focus of inquiry, this chapter shows how reddit provides affordances for the development of collectivity and community for people with harmful Western traditionalist and anti-feminist ideological values. These affordances are valuable to this type of men's group - groups adjacent to the far-right in their obsessions with Western gender traditionalisms, and (in some cases) male supremacy - because they allow for the proliferation and radicalization of ideas within bounded and self-referential communities, subject to limited censorship.

Men's groups that fall under the broad banner of "men's rights" share much of the (Western) traditionalist and conservative rhetorical positioning of the far-right about gender; a 'natural' structuralist position where men should hold power and control over women and the 'Other' (Dragiewicz & Mann, 2016; Jordan, 2016; Messner, 2016). Staunchly anti-feminist,

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[98] The use of "/r/" in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill is deliberate and will be used throughout the chapter. This is the way that individual communities are demarcated on reddit, and in writing separates the reddit communities from the broader ideological communities (i.e., /r/MensRights vs. the Men's Rights Community).

[99] There is a lack of consensus about the meaning of the term "far right", and given the fact that most defining and terming that would place certain groups or individuals in this category are outsiders this is understandable. For this chapter I take on Mudde's (2019) definition that includes the extreme right that "rejects the essence of democracy, that is, popular sovereignty and majority rule, and the radical right that "accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers" (p. 3).

[100] The singular, masculinity, is used purposefully here and at other times in this chapter to reflect the way that, from the perspective of many of the participants in the communities examined in this work, there is only one "right" way to be a man. In other instances, I will use the plural masculinities in deference to the multiple masculinities that are always at play in groups of men and society more broadly, and how these masculinities are always in negotiation with one-another for power and control over the signifiers of "being a man."

these groups argue that gender equity has "gone too far," and that it renders men (particularly White men) a disadvantaged class (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). For the participants in these groups, and proponents of these ideologies (which also include women), feminist-spurred social changes require a reset of values. As a larger movement composed of many different groups, the broader men's 'rights' community has expanded into a web of inter-related ideological constructs that share a common central message, then diverge from one another along different pathways. Ideology in this case is understood in Žižek's sense of both conscious and unconscious phenomena that, along with hiding how the world works for the purposes of control, serve themselves to shape the reality we live in (Žižek, 1994). Men's 'rights' groups, while always being about sex, power, and control, range in focus from perceived unfairness in fathers' custody rights cases (Crowley, 2009), to the belief that the proper social order is a *Handmaid's Tale*-esque total domination of society, sexuality, and culture by men (Jordan, 2016). These groups have both shared and divergent ideological constructs that are anti-feminist and position what men and women should and should not be/do in particular ways.

Men's rights and aligned groups use similar tactics to other far-right groups to recruit members. Using generalizable and unnuanced statements (e.g. "White men have lower and decreasing employment prospects") and narrow interpretations of public controversies (e.g. the US Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Brett Kavanaugh as an unfair "witch hunt" against a White, conservative man), these groups play on the latent desires and fears of their target audience (Munn, 2019; Willer et al., 2013); which is (mostly) White men. Anti-equity work, and in particular White supremacy, has a history of appealing to target audiences (mostly White men, but women as well (Belew, 2018)) online (J. Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Boehme & Isom Scott, 2020; Chebrolu, 2020). Anti-feminist men's groups leverage some of the same kinds of biological deterministic arguments that are prevalent in the White supremacy movement (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 2006; Ferber, 2000) to argue that it is not only right, but the biological imperative of men to dominate women. The biological hierarchies that are developed as a result place, practically and/or theoretically, (White) men as the rightfully dominant members of society.[101] The perceived biological imperative for dominance leads some men to

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[101] This statement requires the parentheses around White to acknowledge the fact that some men who participate in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are not White, and therefore might not adhere to the racialized aspects of these hierarchical systems. That said, the roots of many (if not all) of the biological hierarchies used by groups like these are rooted in the colonial and oppressive contexts of Whiteness (Coston & Kimmel, 2013; Daniels, 2009a)

understand themselves as victims, having lost what is 'rightfully' theirs (Berbrier, 2000; Boehme & Isom Scott, 2020; C. R. Kelly, 2020) and in digital spaces that have been overtly socialized as masculine (Abbate, 2012) and White (Benjamin, 2019), they move to (re)claim power over others. Then, through what Munn (2019) calls "pipelines" of curated media leading to normalization, acclimation, and dehumanization of the "other", new participants are indoctrinated into the deeper recesses of these supremacist ideologies (DeCook, 2019). Using the website reddit.com and the curated nature of its user interface as a backdrop, this chapter will explore how the reddit user experience and its platform design provide ideal spaces for the proliferation and dissemination of far-right rhetoric and ideology, and can help move users toward more extreme views. In this chapter, I examine and critique two groups that occupy different parts of the men's rights spectrum, /r/MensRights, and /r/TheRedPill, both active on the website reddit.com (reddit.com/r/MensRights and reddit.com/r/TheRedPill).

What are Men's Rights Groups and why do they exist?

Western culture is shaped by entrenched sex/gender systems (G. Rubin, 2009) that dictate and regulate power, control, and personal interactions (Connell, 2005; Foucault, 1979). Men and women are situated in particular ways through these oppressive systems, and formulations of meta-control, like hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, and systemic racism, organize us into hierarchies that, in Western cultures, disproportionately give power and value to (White) men over others. Put simply, this type of valuation of one individual over others, or one group over others, leads to the oppression of the individual or subordinate group through exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence; these are Iris Marion Young's five faces of oppression (Young [1988] 2013). There is a deep body of literature that has explored elements of Young's five faces in online environments (e.g. Noble, 2018b), and as our use of networked technologies continues to proliferate, so too will egregious oppressive acts and the opportunities to study them and their complexities. Systems of social control and oppression are dynamic, and are subject, often with some latency, to changes in dominant social worldviews. The construct of masculinity, and in particular Connell's (2005) concept of

hegemonic masculinity,[102] provides a useful prism for examining how these flexible systems of control function.

Conceptualized as the "specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide social setting that *legitimates* unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities" (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 28, emphasis in original), Connell's *hegemonic masculinity* positions an 'ideal' masculinity as one that is difficult, if not impossible to achieve, that is enacted differently at different times and in different places, and that changes with cultural hegemony. For example, while an ideal masculinity of the 1990s would have excluded non-athletic, non-machismo forms of manhood such as the archetypical computer nerd, a new geek masculinity and 'techbro' masculine representation has emerged within the current world of app culture and the internet of things (Braithwaite, 2016; Reagle, 2018). This change has opened space in hegemonic masculinities for tech knowledge as masculine and appealing, but only if some more traditional expectations for masculine representations of the body are maintained (i.e., fit, White, and handsome). The features of masculine interests have changed, but relational power and control over others, including other men, remains intact (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The malleability of hegemonic masculinity (or any culturally hegemonic norm, gendered or otherwise) demonstrates that elements often understood as static (like the 'ideal' man, or male dominance within relationships) are not immutable, and are themselves subject to change through cultural influence. For some, the types of cultural change that force evolutions in systems of social control and oppression are a threat to positions of power and dominance. These shifts are a re-writing of a social contract that undermines their cultural capital, resulting in what Willer and colleagues (2013) called masculine overcompensation, or a set of feelings that Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel (2010) call "aggrieved entitlement".

Like other supremacist ideologies, discourses of masculinity and male dominance in men's rights groups extend from perceived entitlement (Manne, 2020; Martin, 2004), and are rooted in North American institutions and social doctrines (Larkin, 2007). Male (and presumed

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[102] Hegemony, throughout this chapter, can be understood through Halberstam's (2011) definition as "multilayered system[s] by which a dominant group achieves power not through coercion but through the production of an interlocking system of ideas which persuades people of the rightness of any given set of often contradictory ideas and perspectives (p. 17).

White) entitlement to domination is enshrined by the state and in our canons of laws (Rifkin, 1980), the military and militarism (Howard & Prividera, 2004), police and police states (Franklin, 2005), and the Abrahamic religions (Condren, 2009). Consider, for example, that under Canadian law women could not have a bank account without the signature of their husband or male guardian until 1964, the province of Manitoba fired women municipal employees who married until 1971, marital rape was not made illegal until 1983, the Criminal Code sections that made abortion a crime were not invalidated until 1988, and midwifery was not recognized as a profession or medical practice in the province of Quebec until 1998. Airline flight attendants were not allowed to work if married or over the age of 32 until they gained that right through legal action in 1978. Each of these changes could be (wrongly) understood as affronts to the entitlement to male power and historical dominance over women, and are perpetuated through the oppression of the rights and abilities of non-White, non-male figures (hooks, 2003). Understanding systemic male entitlement can help to expose why some men would feel entitled to power and control. The anger these men feel from that loss finds many targets, among them immigrants, non-Christians or those who are not 'Christian enough', and some women (i.e., feminists and others who might eschew North American conservative traditionalism). Some groups of men make these women their primary targets and scapegoats; these men make up part of the men's rights movement (Copland, 2021).

Ranging from simple disgruntlement to violent acts of hatred, anti-feminism brings together otherwise diverse groups of online men's groups under a loose affiliation called 'the manosphere' (Ironwood, 2013). The concept of the manosphere as a distinct cultural entity first appeared in a blog in 2009, and was popularized by the book *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity* (Ironwood, 2013). Debbie Ging (2019b) describes the manosphere as a "loose confederacy of interest groups [that] has become the dominant arena for the communication of men's rights in Western culture" (p. 1). This confederacy of internet groups shares an ideological standpoint that runs contrary to achieved discourses of gender equality.

Men's groups, including groups discussed in this chapter, have roots as ideological offshoots of the 1970's women's and women's liberation movements (Messner, 1998, 2016), and have developed in parallel with contemporary feminism. Men, who were themselves part of the feminist movement, began leveraging the theoretical structures of feminist theory to highlight men's experience as gendered beings. This was done with the intent of developing and

promoting "progressive personal and social change" (Messner, 2016, p. 8). In their view, men were also repressed and oppressed by gendered structures, masculinity, and sex/gender systems more broadly (Messner, 1998). They acknowledged that men were privileged by social and sex roles, but argued that they were "simultaneously dehumanized" by them (Pleck, 2004). The contradictory notions of acknowledging privilege and situating themselves as an oppressed group divided the early men's activists into pro and anti-feminist actors. The anti-feminist faction turned to the oppressive nature of sex roles, and co-opted the language of liberal feminists to refocus the critique of symmetrical sex-role oppression on men's experience.[103] This produced a theorisation about men and male privilege that situated male privilege as a socially constructed myth that served to oppress men (Goldberg, 1976).

Rather than a continuum of more or less radicalized versions of the same group, the modern manosphere consists of groups that share some core values but diverge as they focus on specific issues or aspects of men's experience. The philosophical underpinnings of these distinct groups "manifest less as a continuum of ideologies (where on one end their work would be passive and contained, and on the other wild, aggressive, and militant)" (Cousineau, 2021c, p. 73), but instead like a sphere with filaments extending from the common core – like images of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 – where the spikes and trees extending from the core represent different areas of focus and the extremeness of those views[104]. For example, manosphere groups like Men's Rights, The Red Pill and misogynist incels[105] share anti-feminist sentiments, but their solutions to the feminist 'problem' vary. Men's rights advocates generally favour legal and social reform through traditional means via governmental or judicial reform (less extreme), where incels have resorted to violence in an attempt to force change (very extreme) (Humphreys & Edmiston, 2018; Reeve, 2018).

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[103] See the evolution of the writing of Warren Farrell (1975, 1996, 2005, 2012).
[104] This chapter was authored during the COVID-19 pandemic, so this image is familiar to many, but the image of the virus that causes the COVID-19 illness provides an excellent representation of how we can visualize the construction of the manosphere.
[105] Incel stands for *Inv*oluntary *Cel*ibate, and misogynist incels are the best-known group within the manosphere due to the extensive news coverage the group has received after men who identified as incels committed multiple murders (BBC News, 2018; Humphreys & Edmiston, 2018). They are included here to give an example of the extreme, potentially violent portion of the manosphere.

I've never met a men's rights activist. Why are they so big online?

The introduction in the 1990s of widely available home internet allowed groups with small numbers dispersed over wide geographical areas (including men's rights groups) to gather and grow (Turkle, 1996; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). A newly networked world allowed for the development of more active, larger, and even more micro-focused communities (Thomas, 2011). While touted as a new frontier for building evolved, socially just, and equal spaces by early feminists and social theorists (Rheingold, 1993; Spender, 1996), the internet has played a significant role in the proliferation of oppressive ideas and actions (Forscher & Kteily, 2020; Lumsden & Harmer, 2019). Men's groups used early text-only networked communication spaces (Bulletin Board Services), early websites (including organizations like National Coalition for Men (*National Coalition For Men (NCFM)*, 2019)[106]), and other forums to build community and grow their numbers. These were the precursors to current misogynist men's groups, and many of these digital discursive spaces (or versions of them) remain mainstays of these groups for communication and community action today.

The model for this (relatively) early adoption of the internet as a tool for community building and recruitment were the White supremacist and White nationalist movements. These groups leveraged the ability to network and connect dispersed membership afforded by the internet, as well as the clandestine nature of web participation relative to face-to-face engagement, to build complex networks to help disperse and frame their ideologies (J. Adams & Roscigno, 2005). The result is effective recruitment strategies (Boatman, 2019), and well established and (near) universally acknowledge presence of racist ideology online (Daniels, 2009b; DeCook, 2019; Ebin, 2021). The proliferation of groups within the manosphere has been aided by websites and services that host content of individual users, or aggregate content from a variety of online sources. Blogging platforms have been used extensively by individual men's rights activists and men's groups to promote their messages (Ironwood, 2013), but conversation and the development of specific subgroup ideologies has been best encouraged by websites like reddit.com. On reddit authored content can be posted, contain links to other content on the web, filtered by users in a variety of ways, and views can be isolated into echo chambers (Auxier & Vitak, 2019). The following section will give a primer on reddit, its functionality and features.

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[106] The earliest iteration of the NCFM website available is from the web archive of 1996 (*National Coalition of Free Men*, 1996), but the copyright on that site reads 1995, indicating that the site was active at that time.

Then I will explore the elements of the /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill communities as they manifest on reddit.

What is Reddit?

Reddit.com is a website where user posts and off-site content are aggregated for user consumption. Open communities can be accessed and read by anyone online, but to comment, use the website's voting system, or access quarantined communities (Carlson & Cousineau, 2020), a unique username is required.

Reddit functions in five ways that are important for its success.

1. Users generate and/or share all the content on the site, apart from ads and announcements from the company.
2. Users can curate the content they see by subject, limiting or expanding their experience to suit their needs, and coming together or building communities of shared interest.
3. Any user can vote on any content on the site.[107] Users may upvote (positive) or downvote (negative) content, and the number of votes associated with posts changes where they appear in the algorithmically mediated pages of aggregated posts. Votes are logarithmically weighted, and users accrue points for their posts and comments in a sort of reddit social credit called "Karma."
4. Users can comment and dialogue on (almost) any post or comment on the site. Discussion takes the form of asynchronous Bulletin Board System (BBS)-style threads where primary comments on a post become parent comments, and each parent may have a long and complex series of child comments/discussions associated with it.
5. Users have Quasi-anonymity. The reddit user can be as open or as anonymous as they want[108]. As a user, I can be open about my name, where I live, and my interests, or I can be a lurker/listener – never engaging or building a personal profile, and simply exploring and observing content.

The site is divided into "subreddits" which allow for subject-based grouping of content (e.g. reddit.com/r/turtlefacts/ for photos and facts about turtles), and each subreddit has a set of unique rules moderated by volunteers from within that user community (Marwick, 2017; Massanari, 2015). This approach to content moderation allows users to maintain the rules and

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[107] There are some exceptions to this rule, as users can be banned from posting or voting on content from a given subreddit if they are found to be in violation of the community rules of that sub-community, or subreddits can limit non-subscribed users' abilities to post and/or comment.
[108] For the purposes of this chapter, I am skipping over debates that might be had about whether you can ever be truly anonymous on a platform like reddit, or in any digital platform without top-level technical skills and equipment. For the general population, the level of anonymity provided with basic knowledge of reddit's platform can be relatively high.

specific content policies of subreddits, while giving reddit management-level contact with a small group of users for each subreddit they can use for site-wide moderation. Having these management-level users responsible for each subreddit also allows reddit as a business to maintain distance from subreddit content and plausible deniability when subreddits are initially accused of problematic behaviour. These elements create a massive, mostly user-controlled space for the sharing of content and opinion, and with so many communities, even users looking for niche content find space on the site.

New users are automatically subscribed to 50 subreddits selected by the site, but users can remove all of those default subreddits and subscribe to any subreddits of their choosing. Doing so creates a personalized landing page when logged in that is unique to the user and aggregates content only from their subscribed subreddits.[109] Effectively, users create their own content filter bubble (Pariser, 2011).

/r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill

/r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill provide good case studies for critical examination of the spread of men's rights content as afforded by reddit specifically. These subreddits were chosen as they represent two different communities within the manosphere and how they approach gender and male power. They share deeply anti-feminist values, but discuss and act on them in very different ways (DeCook, 2019). /r/TheRedPill, for example, regularly has posts about the differences between Alpha (good) and Beta (weak/bad) men as a way of critiquing the social order and perceived men's subordination to women

> An Alpha Asshole is a stone. His shape and properties are easily determined and do not change depending on his surroundings. You might not like a particular stone. It might not fit your particular stone criteria. However your assessment will in no way impact the stone. You can yell at, bite or kick the stone. The stone will remain unchanged. In contrast, a Beta Nice Guy is a moist turd. Beta Turds take the shape of whatever stepped on them last. Their entire existence is contextual. When a woman goes on a date with a Beta Turd all of her questions will be met with attempts to

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[109] The way new users are introduced to the site has changed significantly since this chapter was authored. Instead of being automatically assigned subreddits, new users are presented with a list of 27 categories, each containing between 10 and 25 community descriptions, and users choose any number of them as their starting subscriptions.

conform to her expectations. At no point will she be able to get a solid definitive response from mushy turd man because Beta Turds are conformists. (/u/GayLubeOil, 2019).

/r/MensRights is more likely to post about current events, using them to highlight their perceptions of inequalities in the ways that men and women are treated in society

> Prostitute murders sleeping man, robs him, serves only 15 years, gets clemency due to large number of people supporting her. A boy would not get this level of sympathy or this short a sentence. We should organize to make our voices heard in cases like this in the future. (/u/Hibernia86, 2019).

These communities do not represent the most extreme examples of manosphere thinking; a space reserved for communities like extreme misogynist incels. The decision to focus on these, less extreme communities was purposeful in two ways. The first is that incel communities, especially violent misogynist incels, take up more research and media space than their actual numbers would suggest, leaving other less extreme communities under-researched. Second is that examining, comparing, and contrasting between these less-extreme communities demonstrates how varied the manosphere is, and can help demonstrate the incremental development of ideological extremism between closelyallied groups. Comparing /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill can reveal contrast in the ways that different subgroups approach gender-linked social issues, but share some core values. They also demonstrate how reddit's affordances allow groups to be driven by different kinds of content while espousing similar traditionalist values of the right.

/r/MensRights
www.reddit.com/r/MensRights
Created March 19, 2008
314,881 subscribers as of October 4, 2021

The /r/MensRights subreddit is dominated by discussions of the misandry participants perceive in their lives. The users are mostly from Western democracies (USA, Canada, Australia, Western Europe)[110], and they craft discussions around specific issues to build a semi-coherent narrative of the oppression of men. The larger themes within this narrative include statistically higher

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[110] There is a small but notable presence of users in this community from India and Pakistan, and although there are some women who participate in this subreddit community, the majority of users appear to be men.

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numbers of men are homeless or underhoused, murdered, incarcerated, die at work, or die by suicide. They discuss issues of binary gender disparity between men and women in custody court proceedings; spousal support proceedings; allegations, convictions, and relative severity of punishment for perpetrators in sexual assault and misconduct allegations; and the (United States) military draft. Posts and discussion most often begin with content from major news sources, national and local statistics, secondary news sources, or social media that the user believes highlights one (or more) of the subreddit's core issues (e.g., men losing custody of children). They often include a catchy title and brief commentary from the original poster intended to promote discussion and/or frame the content as a men's rights issue in a particular way. Comments from users are generally agreeable, conversation is generally civil when there are disagreements, and users are supportive of others who have been negatively affected by the issue highlighted in the post (e.g., users who feel they have been disaffected by the child custody court system). Almost all threads in the subreddit begin with or come back to being critical of feminism, and what they view as "misandrist" public and judicial policy.

/r/TheRedPill
www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill
Created October 25, 2012
Quarantined September 2018
292,612 subscribed members as of September 2018[111]

/r/TheRedPill is dedicated to "Discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men" (/r/TheRedPill, 2019). What they mean by this is they aim to help men (re)produce a specific type of masculinity and leverage that masculinity to be dominant and sexually satisfied. Posts are largely divided between story telling about sexual experience or lack thereof, and the theoretical underpinning of their sexual and relationship ethos. Men are divided into successful (Alpha) and unsuccessful (other – including Beta, etc.) groups, and sexual strategy is discussed at length. Dominance and manipulation are paramount to the approach espoused by these men, and their understanding for male-female relationships is imbricated with ideologies of male supremacism. Discussion within the forum can be supportive and castigating,

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[111] After being quarantined, subscriber numbers are no longer displayed. Using the workaround old.reddit.com to see the previous user interface, a subscriber number is shown, but these numbers are suspect. For example, it showed 1.7 million subscribed members as of March 1, 2020. This number is highly misleading and likely contains a high number of bots.

and while the tone is civil overall, users who challenge the red pill canon are quickly downvoted or banned.

So, Can We Call These Communities Far-Right?

So, are /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill far-right groups? Or do they occupy a kind of middle ground that can simultaneously expound or mobilize beliefs similar to those of far-right groups, but avoid the deleterious label associated with far-right near-extremism? To establish if they are far-right I need to first define what I mean by *right* in the context of far-right. The work of Norberto Bobbio (1996) is useful here, as it provides a succinct way of discussing the difference between *left* and *right* as a representation of the "original, essential dichotomy" (p.33) between opposing political viewpoints. While Bobbio sets up the left and right as dichotomous to help the reader understand what makes these ideas polar, he is careful to explain that they are not a binary. "The distinction between left and right does not at all preclude, even in everyday language," he says, "the existence of a continuous spectrum which joins the left and the right, or of intermediate positions where the left meets the right" (1996, p. 5). The left, as Bobbio sees it, leans more towards the needs and benefits of the broader social group, and the right towards the needs and benefits of the individual. "On the one hand," Bobbio explains, "people who believe that human beings are more equal than unequal, and on the other, people who believe that we are more unequal than equal" (p.67). Citing Dino Cofrancesco, Bobbio says "The soul of the right can be expressed succinctly in the motto 'Nothing outside or against tradition, everything within and for the sake of tradition'" (p. 46). Tradition here can mean a variety of things, including: as an archetype, the ideal of a past era, as loyalty to a nation, a common destiny, historical memory, or as an awareness of the complexity of reality (Bobbio, 1996). Far-right, then, would be these ideological positions taken to extremes in the context of men's rights, gender traditionalism and male supremacy. We can use Bobbio's interpretation of left and right (keeping in mind that political ideology exists in spectrum, rather than binary) to evaluate whether /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are in fact '*far-right.*'

For Bobbio, the fundamental question that separates the left and right is one of equality, and whether a group works toward or away from equality. Understanding that Bobbio's conceptualization of equality is grounded in the Italian term *uguale* is essential, since this connotation makes the understanding of equality/inequality much closer to sameness/difference, rather than having more of less of *something*. In the case of /r/TheRedPill, discussion is

frequently and deeply entrenched in the concept of Alpha and Beta men (where Alpha is always already different from, and better than, Beta), and that men should be in charge of (most) spheres of society (see MoltenM, 2020, for one example)[112]. While being problematically Western-centric and heteronormative, the crux of the belief is that there exists a permanent and socially solidified set of differences between men, between men and women, **_and_** that given those differences (Alpha) men should be in control. For the men of /r/TheRedPill, these standardized gender differences, and male domination because of them, are traditional in that they are archetypal, couched in a historical memory of male supremacy, and reinforce gender ideals of a past era. They promote concepts of difference, and that within the categories that separate people (i.e., gender, male hierarchies, etc.) humans are more unequal than they are equal. With these understandings in mind, we can certainly conclude that /r/TheRedPill is situated on the *right,* and the male supremacist content, centered on domination and control over the autonomy of others, make for a compelling argument for considering them a potentially dangerous group on the far-right of the spectrum.

The discussion of left and right for /r/MensRights is more complicated. On the matter of equality, members of /r/MensRights would argue that the singular driver of their discussions and activism is to achieve Bobbio's equality-as-sameness on behalf of men. The men's rights movement of /r/MensRights believes that it is men who are widely disadvantaged in Western society, and therefore their agitation toward equality is meant to return men and women to parity in a world where feminist dogma has made women the privileged class. The difficulty of the disconnect between how you (the reader) might see the group politically, and how they (/r/MensRights users) might see themselves lies, then, in ontological and epistemological difference – fundamental differences in understanding how things are (ontology), and how we know what we know (epistemology). Members of /r/MensRights understand that we live in a world that is deeply unequal, which is true, but in their understanding, men are oppressed by this unequal system. Justification of this worldview comes in the form of personal anecdotes and posting of articles and content that serve to highlight the core issues listed in the community description earlier in this chapter. Wage disparity is a favourite topic, and community members use articles from popular press (/u/JohnKimble111, 2020), social media posts they understand as

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[112] /r/TheRedPill also has an entire sorting category for posts labeled "Red Pill Theory" which contains much of their discussion of topics of social order and men's positioning within that order.

feminist (/u/pritchie654321, 2020), and statistics about benefits, work fatalities, and injuries (/u/mhandanna, 2020) to support the view that men are *the* subordinated class. Rarely are the assertions of male subordination challenged in the community, which often leads to surface-level investigation of the resources and information the community uses to support its claims of male oppression.

On the surface, the counter-narrative presented by /r/MensRights should challenge our assumption that they are on the right, as they claim to stand in resistance to normative, gendered expectations of men. However, here too we can apply Bobbio's (1996) adherence to traditionalism as a mark of the right to help us establish their position on that spectrum. The rhetoric in /r/MensRights is deeply anti-feminist, and they use feminism as a foil and a scapegoat to demarcate their positions as advocates for men. They position their worldview as the alternative to feminist-influenced social structures – structures that they believe have made the world radically unequal in favour of women. They argue that feminism is, therefore, the reason for the male subordination they perceive in the world. Within their community, the members of /r/MensRights agitate for reliance on meritocratic, neoliberal, and capitalist ways of measuring value and social contribution; ways of knowing that disproportionately elevate and privilege (some) men and traditionally masculine ways of being over all others. In other words, when considered in relation to existing historical systems of oppression, they appear to push not for actual equality (sameness), but rather for a return to a system state that privileged men over women. One way they do this is through highlighting men's deeper engagement in dirty, dangerous, or time-consuming professions and activities – roles traditionally taken on by men – without critical exploration about why these roles have historically belonged to men.[113] They spend little time making arguments about opening traditionally feminized professions to men (e.g., care work), nor changing traditionally male roles to be more inclusive to women (i.e., they don't seem interested in re-engineering tools and equipment to make them accessible to everyone, or changing the ways we work to make them more inclusive). The one-sided, loss-focus of their arguments demonstrates intentions steeped in a Western gendered traditionalism

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[113] There is also relatively little discussion about men in positions of power and high prestige, beyond the idea that men have these positions because they 'earned' them through hard work and the ability/willingness to work the long hours required to achieve and maintain them.

(both institutional and personal) and a perceived historical memory of male privilege[114]. There is also the implicit preference for an economic system that is fundamentally capitalist and based exclusively on ill-defined 'merit,' where value is (mostly) measured through time-at-work and "production," at the expense of care work and other unpaid labour. While there are advocates within this group for more open emotional spaces for men, and an expanded role for men as fathers and mentors, these users are generally met with passive agreement by other users (e.g., "I agree that we should have more men in education in the lower grades") or a 'yes and' approach ("yes, men should feel confident being nurses, and the feminists should be all over that shouldn't they?"). Even with the small number of advocates for more open roles for men, and the tepid agreement from the community, the traditionalist undercurrents of gender and capitalist value-orientation within /r/MensRights is enough to situate them on the *right*. Combine these attributes with deeply anti-feminist discussion and calls for action, and they land on the far-right for the purposes of this chapter.

How Reddit is Involved

Having established both /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill within the spectrum of anti-feminist far-right ideology, we can now consider how reddit enables participation and recruitment to these groups and provides space for expansion of far-right rhetoric and ideology. As a platform, reddit builds community for its users in a number of important ways: (1) It brings groups together, either by allowing existing groups with low and geographically dispersed membership to gather online, or the formation of new groups of like-minded individuals (the de-coupling of shared experience from geography); (2) it allows those who would rather be listeners (lurkers) (Crawford, 2011) to participate passively in group activities (it has an available spectrum of participation); (3) it acts as a safe haven for otherwise socially contentious groups (a free and open platform made up of communities of shared interest); and (4) provides the auspices of a legitimate and widely used site as a mode of connection (it feels cogent). Each of these affordances, as imbricated technological infrastructures and human agency (Leonardi, 2011), are significant in the development of flourishing anti-feminist communities. Having an established meeting space helps build connection between community members, and allows low-

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[114] I use the term perceived historical memory here because it is questionable (at best) whether this has ever actually been the case, with considerations of unequal privilege across class (for example) between men. It is, however, an embedded belief within members of the community that in "the past" men had it better.

participation and new members of the community to feel like part of the group (Glover &
Sharpe, 2020). Community sensibility, or the feeling of being in a group that shares common
characteristics and interests, helps groups better weather challenges (Kerwin et al., 2015), and
community participation helps develop social capital[115] and personal well-being (Glover, 2016).
Salazar (2018) argued that these concepts of personal and group gain through community should
be applied to far-right groups, by positing the alt-right as a community of discourse.

Applying sense of community in leisure literature to subreddit communities helps us to
understand the importance of community in the development and proliferation of the types of
far-right anti-feminist ideology we see in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. Users, especially new
users in a quarantined community like /r/TheRedPill, seek out these spaces purposefully,
showing an intentional seeking of the community elements afforded by reddit. But, users come to
reddit for the curated content experience (Massanari, 2015), and so it is also possible that the
finding of community is a biproduct of the reddit platform. Regardless of user motivation, these
community elements, combined with reddit's commitment to open speech, ease of use, and the
quasi-anonymity of users provides space for hate speech, misogyny, and racism to proliferate on
the site (Massanari, 2017). Although much has changed on reddit since it first introduced an
actionable harassment, bullying, and hate speech content policy in 2015, reddit remains a place
where individuals come to engage in contentious communities.[116]

Recruitment into /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill appears to follow similar types of
trajectories identified in previous literature on the alt-right; work that is modelled on theories
developed in the study of terrorism and extremist recruitment. Munn (2019) identifies three
significant phases as individuals move from introduction of socially controversial views to
extreme versions of those views through: normalization, acclimation, and dehumanization. Munn
points out that each individual journey is different and, "while these phases might be loosely
mapped to the start, middle and end … they should not be seen as mutually exclusive or strictly
linear. They may overlap or occur in more cyclical formations." (Munn, 2019, Three cognitive

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[115] Glover, Shinew and Parry (2005) define social capital as "the consequence of investment in and cultivation of
social relationships allowing an individual access to resources that would otherwise be unavailable to him or her,"
and have linked the development of, and access to, social capital to health and well-being (Glover & Parry, 2008).
[116] There are signs that this may be slowing as reddit has moved in significant ways to limit hate speech and
harassment on the platform. Reddit's harassment policy has undergone some significant revisions since October
2019 that have resulted in the banning of a large number of communities, including /r/The_Donald, and
/r/GenderCritical, and significant changes to what the site deems harassing behaviour (Allyn, 2020; u/spez, 2020)

phases, para. 1). Described by Munn's participants as a "gradual progression," initial exposure and internalization comes when the individual is repeatedly exposed to content that, while problematic, does not push the user away. Through this repeated exposure, the user becomes acclimated to the content, opening them up to more radical notions through another round of normalization. Through this process, users move slowly toward ideological extremes, and other forms of (often more radical) content.

We can see a simplified version of this process within manosphere men's groups. /r/MensRights content is unrestricted on reddit, and so it occasionally makes its way into the /r/all feed, or the suggested subreddits of users. With over 311,000 members at the end of August 2021, participants are active in many parts of reddit, and other users are likely exposed to /r/MensRights content through their comments, user pages, and post histories. Joining /r/MensRights is relatively straightforward. /r/TheRedPill has a different path, as content from the subreddit no longer appears for non-subscribed users since being quarantined in 2018. Users new to the group post-quarantine cannot be directed there via a search or through their aggregated feed, and must know about the subreddit to find it and participate. Most often, this happens through users on other subreddits like /r/MensRights. Other than having predominantly male users, the closest connection between /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill is their disdain for feminism and feminists. For the /r/MensRights users who believe that feminism has disrupted natural order and hierarchy between men and women, allusions to the Red Pill ideology are enticing, and they are likely to follow other users to Red Pill communities, and potentially beyond.

Why this all matters

The combination of the user's ability to specifically curate their own exposure to content, the sense of community within individual subgroups, reddit's algorithmic and user-vote based sorting mechanisms, and the permissive orientation of the platform to many kinds of speech, makes reddit an ideal platform for sustaining undercurrents of masculinist far-right ideology, and socialising new users to these ideas and groups. Like Munn's (2019) pipeline to extremism, the men's rights communities on reddit have both introductory spaces for first contact of new initiates, and deeper, more intense discussion spaces as breeding grounds for more radical action and thought. Where /r/MensRights leverages examples of men's potential social subordination

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and provides examples of popular cultural "misandry," /r/TheRedPill takes these issues to be self-evident and instead engages in a type of male superiority and/or supremacist socio-sexual warfare where women are to be treated as a subordinated class in all aspects of life. While it is possible to move directly to the extremes of ideological thought and action relatively quickly (e.g. going full "red pill" or becoming a misogynist incel), adherents to extreme ideologies are far more likely to move through more socially palatable (mainstream) critiques and ideological standpoints before committing to strong extremist viewpoints (Munn, 2019; Walklate & Mythen, 2018). In this example, finding /r/MensRights, then moving on to /r/TheRedPill demonstrates the process of small steps in moving from a kind of soft misogynist men's advocacy in /r/MensRights to an overt kind of male supremacy in /r/TheRedPill. Reddit provides the type of scaffolded affordances required to carry new users into problematic ideological spaces and to mobilize misogyny. How and how often this process might play out on reddit merits further research attention.

If we can demonstrate the same kinds of inter-referential community patterns within men's groups identified with far-right ideological development, then we can conclude that similar types of radicalizations are occurring.[117] Indeed, acts such as the murder of Daniel Anderl, son of New Jersey U.S. federal judge Esther Salas by Roy Den Hollander (Haworth et al., 2020; Marcotte, 2020), demonstrate that one end point of the ideological progression within men's groups is the murder of those who oppose their views. Den Hollander was involved in several federal lawsuits in the U.S. alleging discrimination against men, and was a known ""men's rights" troll" online (Marcotte, 2020, para. 1). While acts of violence like Den Hollander's, or the murder of 10 by self-proclaimed incel Alek Minassian in Toronto, Canada (Humphreys & Edmiston, 2018) are often positioned in the media as lone wolf attacks or stochastic terrorism, they link back to involvement in men's groups online – a phenomenon that demonstrates the interconnectedness of these misogynist murders (DiBranco, 2020; Marcotte, 2020). This should alarm us! While discussions within these men's groups are about the place of men and masculinity within modern (Western) society, they also push users to the ideological right and far-right. This should be frightening, and participants in men's communities have

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[117] This type of data collection is possible, but it would require a sophisticated set of data scrapes that included user data including posts and comments (available with the proper API-linked scripts) as well as their subscribed feeds, reading, and posting patterns (likely only available to reddit).

demonstrated the ability to act on their feelings about gender and the social order with violence (C. N. Baker, 2020; Humphreys & Edmiston, 2018; Nasser, 2020; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Perhaps even more insidious is their less overt, and non-violent push back against cultural and social justice movements. The embeddedness of sex-role and gender traditionalism seen across the men's rights movement (overtly in places like /r/TheRedPill and more covertly in spaces like /r/MensRights), places them in lockstep with other far-right groups, while the absence of the same types of overt or obsessive racism or nationalism sets them apart.

The progress achieved by feminism is seen as an affront to male power and a devolution of the social order by the men in these groups, and the outcome of that feeling is a sense of grievance that has active and daily repercussions in civil society (Manne, 2020). Posts from /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill link to outside news content and blogs, YouTube videos, other forum platforms, and contain millions of words of topic comments and discussions. The sheer volume of information and 'proof' as compared to mainstream refutation and correctives makes this rhetoric seem like self-evident truth, much like content that supports conspiracy theories/groups like QAnon (Aliapoulios et al., 2021). In many cases these outside links and comments direct the user further to the right, and deeper into the cultural and ideological spectrum of men's group participation discussed earlier. Reddit is designed to permit and encourage this aggregation of content and creates focused ideological pathways that carry information and users toward more radical viewpoints.

7 : Application of a Digital Ethnographic Assemblage Theory-Method – the Research Technoassemblage

Becoming Disoriented

Having cleaned up the debris left over from the hurricane that is a 15-month-old, I have taken my tea and my attention to the collection of reddit posts that are the bulk of empirical materials for my research project. Using laptop and extra screen, wireless mouse and keyboard, noise cancelling headphones, and a variety of software tools, I read posts[118] that I captured – intending to freeze them in time for later analysis – their comments, and the comments on comments (figure 7-1). My workspace, even when it is "tidy" is always a kind of organized chaos of analogue and digital materials that all contribute to my work. I follow links to other places online. I watch videos, see images, and read articles of varying quality, washed over by content and a digital ocean of research data.

Checking my spreadsheet notes and opening my digital notebook, I navigate to the next post in my series and the familiar image of reddit appears, with the addition of my data catalogue sidebar (figure 7-2). This post critiques what the author calls the 'deep hypocrisy of feminism', and links to a YouTube video of a women's march protest during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. My heart sinks a little when I see that there are over 600 comments – over 20,000 words. Tonight will be a one-post analysis.

Figure 7-1: My basement workspace - with plants for sanity.

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[118] I will use the following terms throughout this paper: Post – a piece of content (text, link, image, or video posting) made by a reddit user that is open to comments; Comment – text and link content contributed by reddit user in response to a post or other comment; Thread – the entirety of a single post and all associated comments.
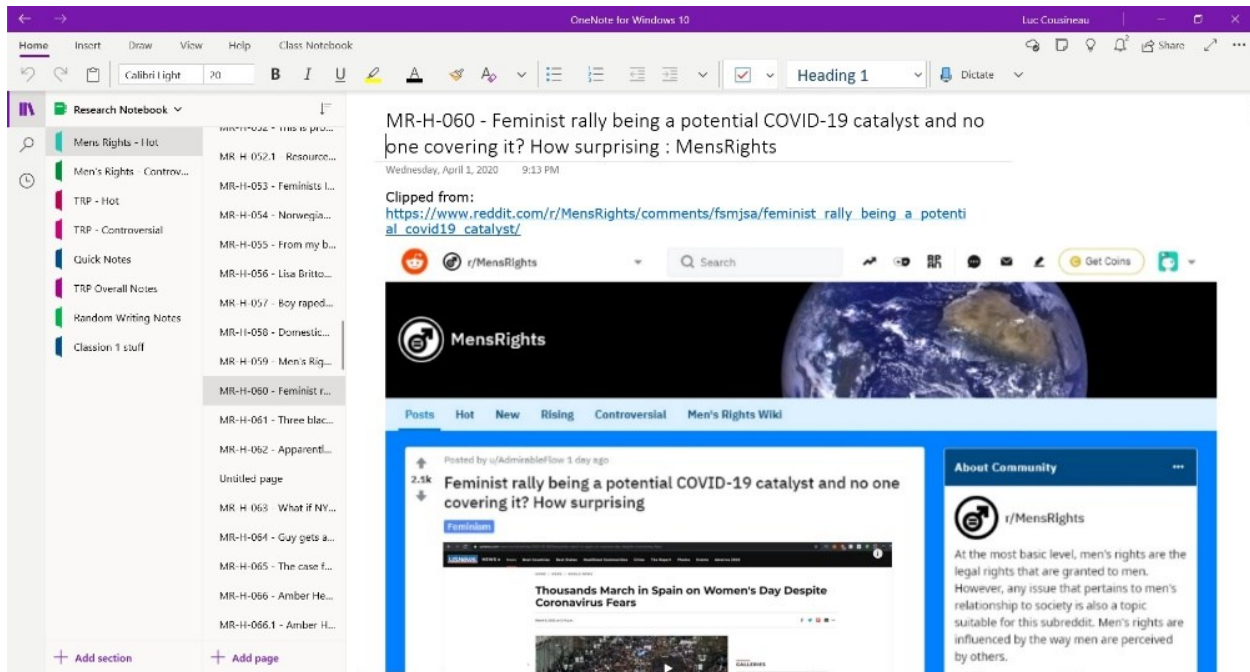
Figure 7-2: Screenshot of reddit data capture in researcher digital data notebook.

An hour later, I have read hundreds of user comments on all kinds of issues, and I have just finished a sub-thread of comments on comments on comments detailing the problems brought about by the 'socially accepted practice of hypergamy in modern women.' Hypergamy, I remind myself, is the term used by men's rights advocates to describe the practice of women always seeking 'higher status' partners as a biological imperative that overrides 'common sense.' This is a common refrain in men's rights circles and usually seems to come from men who have experienced failed relationships. In this instance it feels whiny, but it usually does since it is a mechanism for men to blame the failures of their own relationships (and themselves) on women and biology – not surprisingly, it is never their fault.

After noting the discussion on hypergamy in my research notes on screen 2, I return to the data screen (screen 1) with the intention of continuing to work my way through tonight's post. The next comment begins an entirely new sub-thread, and all the reading and long discussion on hypergamy have taken my attention in many directions. Returning to the data screen and reading the start of the new line of comments, I realise that I can't remember the original post or topic area of this thread – how did I get here? This loss of place happens sometimes, especially in long threads, but I remember it being something vaguely

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anti-feminist, although that could just be the brain fog of reading content from an overtly and aggressively anti-feminist source all evening. Everything here is anti-feminist at some level. But the content of these threads moves and shifts, follows tangents, then (sometimes) returns to a central point – this is a feature of reddit, not a bug. It is like the water of a river spilling over its banks, finding ways to move and pool away from the original path, or sometimes coming back to rejoin the flow; where the conversation goes doesn't always make sense.

I scroll up through my data image. Just like I would online, I go up through the sub-thread I have just finished reading, to the parent comment that started it. Up past that to find its own parent comment, and the real root of that sub-thread. Then up, and up, and up through all the comments reddit tells me are more popular and their sub-threads, until finally I get back to the top of the page and the original post. It is indeed anti-feminist, and is direct about it. The women's march – I remember now. Reminded of that, I start to scroll back down and realise that I have not left myself a note about where I left off – no trail of breadcrumbs (digital or otherwise) to help me find my way back through the quagmire of comments on comments on comments. I do a text search for hypergamy, but there are enough hits that I get tired thinking about trying to figure out where to go. I realise I am exhausted, and I close the post.

I have worked my way through dozens of posts so far in this project, and I have honed my hardware and software set-up to make it as painless as possible, but today I am defeated by the fact that things on reddit don't happen in a straight line. I know that this captured image isn't going anywhere, and I can come back to it when I have more energy, but something about this feels like a defeat I could have somehow prevented…

When I decided to research men's rights groups on reddit, I did so because I thought it would be interesting and that there was something to say about the discourses of masculinity that are happening within these groups. To put boundaries on my ethnographic project, I chose two online communities (the sub-communities of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill of the website reddit.com), and set out to capture the essence of their discourses through the content of their posts and the words in their comments. I chose two communities rather than one because I though a contrast between two groups would be a good way to make the discourses of

masculinity that I uncovered feel more real, and to demonstrate my experience that men's groups, although often lumped together, have some important and tangible differences. I thought it would be easy too – why not do research on the internet, in a place that I already spend time?

It seemed manageable and correct to pluck from the vast compendium of posts in these communities, enough material to speak with some authority about the natures and affects of the groups, and get a sense of their prevailing discourses and narratives. I did that, and I have written about these communities as entry-points and bastions of far-right ideological positions (Cousineau, 2021a), and explored the gendered configurations of practices that are at play among their members (Cousineau, 2021b). But the process of doing research in this way, meaning using the tools and approaches I honed doing qualitative research offline, left me with questions that were not easily answered by the approaches to digital ethnography I used to build my project, and the humanist focus on user content[119] I used in my research.

My research project was grounded in humanist qualitative inquiry; focused on the individuals and discourses of reddit communities. It "relies on realist ontologies and constructionist epistemologies" (Berbary, 2015, p. 30), taking an ontological position "that privilege[s] hierarchies associated with human dominance, supremacy, and agency as sites and sources of knowing" (Rose & Johnson, 2020, p. 435). Because of these onto-epistemological and theoretical foundations, the research focused on the texts[120] generated by the reddit users I chose to study – the 'voices' of the 'people.' By drawing on only user text, frozen in time at the time of capture, I succumb to what Büscher, Urry, and Witchger call the "temptation to hold down and dissect phenomena to study them" (2011, p. 1), and conclude, before beginning, that the proper way to "know" these communities is through the words in their threads and my interpretation of them. Moments of loss and feelings of failure like the one described in the opening of this paper - realisations about the first-order role technology plays in how I experience research content - call these ways of knowing into question. They are small ruptures in a seemingly straightforward process of doing qualitative research online with significant consequences.

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[119] Content here refers to the digital materials (text, links, etc) that appear on reddit brought by, or written by, users.
[120] Texts is used here is the broader definition of cultural texts, since reddit users in my communities of study include images, video, and links to other sites within their posts, but even these are made up of mostly text (i.e., words on the page), so generally my references to text throughout the rest of the manuscript refer to that more specific understanding of words on the page.

The feeling of being lost I describe to open this paper happened more than once. The repetition of events like this during my research endeavor pushed me to think in different ways about the constituents of online communities, and the discourses they create and consume. It became clear that technologies are essential to what we see, capture, and study as researchers online beyond their role as vessels for digital data, and contribute a digital component to Law's (2004) discussion on the messiness of social research. My disorientation is not simply a matter of losing my place in a huge collection of digital ethnographic data (this is the plight of all ethnographic research), but a reflection of the messiness of web-based inquiry and how digital ethnographic research design is contingent and must be dynamic (Pink et al., 2016; Postill & Pink, 2012). The messiness of my research space is imbricated in reddit's design, its programmed methods of sorting and re-sorting content, how I choose to access the site, and a user interface that pushes users toward the newest and 'most popular' content.

All research spaces are in some ways contingent, and digital ethnographic work requires that we address these contingencies in nuanced ways. What I identify as important as a researcher is always contingent on my relationship to the research space (positionality), but digital ethnographic work is doubly influenced by familiarity with the technology, and willingness/ability to engage with those technologies in different ways. The importance of familiarity and engagement goes beyond simply being capable of using a computer to access the internet, and involves important considerations about where and how data will be collected and analysed. The data I collect in a digital ethnography of reddit is contingent on how users interact with the site, and is influenced by their positionality, current state of mind, and ability; elements that are themselves culturally and socially contingent. Elements of reddit's design and programming have specific considerations that are themselves changed by the hardware used to access them. It is all very complicated and messy (Law, 2004), and each of these elements are so interconnected that none can be removed without changing everything. Thinking of research spaces as hyper-complex matrices is not new, but repositioning our research to include or focus on digitality adds layers and tangents that are nuanced and specific enough that more interrogation is needed on how experienced researchers might acknowledge and address them.

The intended audience for this paper is those researchers who are familiar with the complexities of thoughtful and contemplative qualitative work, but are less familiar with the

ways digitality and digital research spaces effect these well-known considerations. In this work I will explore how, in looking for a useful way to think through the challenges of my own digital ethnographic research, I came to rest with Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage as one way to make manageable thinking through digitality in qualitative research. Using my experience from a large digital ethnographic project, I present assemblage in digital ethnography as a theory-method that can help us work through the challenges that continue to present themselves for researchers in dynamic digital landscapes.

I will describe my use of digital ethnographic methods, the ruptures I encountered, and the ways thinking about assemblage helped me move forward when I felt disoriented and discouraged through the research process. I will briefly explain Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage as useful in thinking through the complexity of digital research, and I will discuss three important ways a digital ethnographic assemblage theory-method can shape research approaches: technology (hardware and software) as a critical part of assemblage in digital research; perspectives on linearity and time; and ways of engaging understood through expertise.

Digital Ethnographic Methods and the Complexities of "Capturing" Reddit.

The ethnographic project that brought about my thinking through theory-method combined long-term community observation with systematic data collection in the form of full-page captures and occurred over multiple years. Observation, for the purposes of the project, took place over two years, and systematic page capture over three months, capturing roughly 500 posts and over 23,000 individual posts and comments. This section explores the complexities of online ethnographic listening and data capture as I encountered them, then discusses how navigating these difficult spaces led to curiosity and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage.

Complexities of Listening

Observation in my communities was conducted using what Kate Crawford (2011) calls online listening, a "practice of intimacy, connection, obligation and participation online" (p. 527) where involvement is not as a voice, but rather as a silent participant. Listeners are integral parts of online communities and are the consumers of content produced by relatively few very active, content creating users. Prior to listening, this type of participation was often called lurking, and the term/designation for users carried with it a pejorative connotation that lurkers "contribute[d] little value to online communities, if not acting as an active drain on their growth" (Crawford,

2011, p. 527). The lurker, then, can be seen as passive and uninvolved, and not a real member of the community. This has certainly been the case in discussions of lurking as or within ethnographic practice. Beaulieu (2004) suggested that, while lurking might provide some advantages, such as unobtrusive observation, that the "the subject position of the ethnographer probably does not quite map" the same way as other listening members (p. 147). Both Schrooten (2012) and Varis (2015) echo Beaulieu's critique, using the same argument of researcher subject positionality. In the many years since these critiques of 'silent' observation, user numbers and the interfaces of social media like reddit have changed significantly. The number of reported active users and page views vastly outnumber the content being posted, and this calls into question whether these critiques can still apply. I was a non-researching listener for many years.

The reliance on the idea of contribution through posting, commenting, and otherwise visible means of online activity limits the ways that we can understand online participation, erases the contributions of members of communities who may not post, or comment regularly, and drastically limits potential for research. In this modality where "speaking trumps listening" (Molina, 2017, p. 112), the expression of the written word, posted comment, or linked media takes precedence over the consumption of that media and the experience of the reader/watcher. It is also potentially at odds with the application of traditional anthropological theory to cyberspace (Nardi, 1996), and the delineation and purposeful construction of a field site as a network (Burrell, 2009), in that it erases the contributions (and existence) of members of the community that are not 'interacting' with the research. This state of erasure in research is particularly true of reddit users that we might consider "listeners" who, while they don't generate posts or comments, vote on posts and comments on the site. These votes change the way that content appears to other users and has tangible impacts on content visibility as well as ascribing reputational status within the reddit community to those who have posted and/or commented. On reddit, speaking (through posts and comments) is not the only way to interact or have an impact on discourse, and the voting mechanism forms a key way that members are disciplined or affirmed by the community. The decision between listening and contributing content is clearly epistemologically important (Leander & Mckim, 2003).

Especially in online communities like those I study on reddit, only a small number of people contribute content to the group space. In my collected materials from /r/MensRights,

there were 11,518 total posts and comments. If each of those posts and comments was contributed by a different user from the 264,000[121] members of the community, that is just over four percent. While this sample is from a small number of the total posts in the community, the four percent assumes each contribution in the data comes from a unique individual, ignoring repeat commenters or multiple posts by the same user. This example serves to help us understand that the number of members of a community who "actively" contribute content is relatively small. The seemingly small number of contributors from the larger community matches estimates made by Crawford (2009) and Nonnecke and colleagues (Nonnecke et al., 2004; Nonnecke & Preece, 2003) that less than ten percent of online community members were content contributors, meaning that non content-generating activity is the norm.

Rather than just taking up space and padding community numbers, then, listeners are an integral part of the community and form most content consumers. In fact, the content contributors are dependent on the listening consumer for the success of the community (Lacey, 2011). "It is still the case," writes De Seta (2020) that a large percentage of everyday interactions with websites, apps and online services are dominated by practices of reading, watching and querying that are not explicitly participatory" (p. 85). To take on the role of a listener within an online community then, is to be a researcher in the space of the quiet majority. The researcher experience occurs as analogous to those members who choose not to make their voices (or keyboards) heard, and makes the concept of multisensory ethnography (where the researcher's sensual experience beyond the visual [textual] is understood as vital and significant (Pink, 2009)) essential.

But my decision to be a listener was not made for these sophisticated reasons at first – that came later. The justification for listening as digital ethnographic practice came reflexively and as a reaction to a more significant consideration as I chose to do research on online communities connected to the far-right — safety!

Men's rights and other men's communities online are locations of far-right ideology (Copland, 2021; Cousineau, 2021a; Koulouris, 2018; Winter, 2019), and can serve as segments of what Munn (2019) calls the pipeline to extremism. Active participation in these communities,

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[121] This was the average number of participants in the community over the period that I collected by data. As of the writing of this paper, the community has over 311,000 members.

especially as a researcher with social justice and equity orientations, has the potential to subject the user-researcher to a variety of forms of online harassment and other potentially dangerous behaviours (Cuevas, 2018; Jhaver et al., 2018; Marwick et al., 2016). My initial research plan involved a kind of simple, question-based agitational involvement in the community to solicit affirmations and defences of group ideologies in the face of equality worldviews. A research mentor challenged this approach in two ways: (1) it would open me up to the possibility of attack, even with very careful concealment of my identity; and even more importantly, (2) manufacturing outrage in communities already at loggerheads with equity worldviews was likely unnecessary.

My decision to remain as a content consumer, rather than a content creator, is reflective of my desire to feel safe as I do this work. I consider the work of exploring and illuminating the discourses of manosphere communities (problematic or otherwise) to be of vital importance, but in a time where it is possible, reasonable, and there are trustworthy ways to do so without exposing myself, I have chosen safety over exposure. In making this decision I consider my own desires to stay away (at least during the research process) from the brigade of trolls and would-be attackers who come together against research and popular media narratives that threaten white, male, hegemonic power (Cuevas, 2018; Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2019; Tang & Fox, 2016) as well as my young child and partner who do not deserve to be engaged by online harassers. While it is possible that this exposure to harassment and trolls may come after publication, the context is different; the project is done, the ways that I write myself at risk are post-hoc, and the responses are reactionary so I can be better prepared (C. W. Johnson, 2009).[122] In the end, the decision to listen rather than talk during my research was made to help me feel safe, but as I read thousands of anti-feminist, soft misogynist, and male supremacist comments, and saw subscriber numbers climb steadily over time, I began to understand that there were thousands of users who were consuming this content and 'listening' to these conversations just like I was.

The important research decision to listen but not speak only showed its full significance as I considered it reflexively. My considerations had been foremost about safety (of myself and my family), but all decisions about researcher engagement have significant and layered

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[122] Like Johnson (2009), who's point was about academic safety but should resonate at the level of personal safety in a world that is not safe for members of many communities (e.g., LGBTQ+, BIPoC) to encounter our writings that make us vulnerable in a variety of ways is easier later.

consequences. If, as a researcher online I see only those users who contribute content, and I explore only that contributed content and the users who produce it, then I am likely ignoring a vast swath of community members who are essential to that community's success. It also gives away that I am unfamiliar with how many online communities operate. The post highlighted in the opening vignette, for example, had hundreds of comments, but it also had over 2,000 positive votes at the time of capture, meaning that at minimum 1,400 more users engaged with the content without speaking. These are elements that matter and that, again, I only came to realise reflexively through analysis.

Complexities of Capturing

The second part of data collection was the systematic capture of full posts (including original post content, linked media, and all comments from the threads) over the course of three months. Three times per week, the five most popular and five most controversial[123] threads from both /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill were captured using full-website screen capturing software and saved as image files. The resulting 510 threads were individually reviewed and analysed, examining the prevailing discourses within the communities, and in particular the discourses of masculinity that were at work.

The decision to save as image files was made because of the desire to be able to (re)view the website content at another time, as it was on the day of capture.[124,125] Saving the entire page as an image was a pragmatic way to control a dynamic research space by holding the community and its discourses as a series of snapshots. With these snapshots I was able to pick up my analysis at any time, and maintain a data set that always held the three-month moment described above, as it appeared on the days it was captured.

An unintended consequence of freezing dynamic research content in motion, "holding it down" (Büscher et al., 2011), is that it can prevent us from having to account for changes between threads over time. I can speak about the discourses present in the thread when I capture it, and ignore the potential for the significant discussions within that thread to change focus after

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[123] This was determined by the reddit sorting algorithms, not by me, and it subject to the kind of complicated, black boxed calculations that go into post sorting for users on reddit.

[124] A workable option to save as PDF files was not available at the time.

[125] As a note to transparency, this systematic data was collected while I was on parental leave and served as a kind of brain break from the rigors of new parenthood. Thorough analysis of the captures was not completed until my return to work.

data collection was complete. On reddit, where the time a post spends as a most popular post (e.g., on the 'front page') is fleeting, even multiple data collection sessions per week rarely captured the same post twice. While this was not part of my decision-making process when I chose full-page capture, it speaks to the importance of the temporality of data in digital research (Cousineau et al., 2019), and how the research data and outputs are the result of choices and the researcher's own filters rather than simple givens – the researcher is always at the centre, implicated in every aspect of the project (Gullion, 2018). When revisiting threads several months after data collection, some had more comments, some were deleted, and none appeared in the most popular or most engaged-with posts in either community. Unwittingly, by choosing to capture threads in this way and subsequently contrasting them with live versions during analysis, I had encountered a negotiation of temporality not anticipated when I designed my research, but that was clearly important and has the potential to have significant effects on research findings and process.

Exposing complexity and following curiosity

So far, I have described ways that I encountered unanticipated factors of complexity as I moved through data collection and analysis for this research project. The act of being disoriented in the data as described in the opening vignette illustrates that the user interface[126] is an important part of the way that users (and researchers) take in information, discourses, and ideologies presented in reddit threads. Choosing to listen rather than speak in these communities, and my subsequent justification of that decision as methodologically appropriate, continues discussions about what we might mean by 'participant' in digital ethnography, and reveals important considerations for researchers about understanding involvement, methodological procedure, and familiarity with communities studied. The ability and choice to capture and freeze internet spaces, then return to them later highlights how my own filters shape data and what I decide is 'important' when I discuss community discourses. These are all issues addressed as part of the crisis of representation (Marcus & Fischer, 1999). They illustrate "the uncertainty within the human

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[126] The user interface is the part of the computer system that enables interaction and serves as a bridge between users and the system (D. L. Stone et al., 2005). The way it is used here is mean to represent the means of interaction that the user has with the website and website content, and what is permitted and limited through the visual, clickable, readable presentation of website content. For many users, especially when interacting with internet platforms, the interface represents their entire experience with the system (Constantine & Lockwood, 1999), and they are ignorant to the ways that companies manage, maintain, and influence information through those interfaces.

sciences. . . aris[ing] from the (noncontroversial) claim that no interpretative account can ever directly or completely capture lived experiences" (Schwandt, 2014, p. 48), brought into the realm of digital inquiry. Like all (qualitative) inquiry, what we see as data in online research, and why we choose certain means of capturing data are telling of how (or if) we are engaged with the complexities and challenges of the online environment. Our acceptance that all accounts, even of digital data that we can freeze and examine over and over, are "partial, incomplete and written by a particular scholar who comes from a particular standpoint and who wants to advance knowingly or unknowingly a particular cause or interest" (Parry & Johnson, 2007, p. 123) is an essential part of doing trustworthy science.

Even as each of the small bits of theory I use, in their own way recognise "the limitations of a single method, the discursive structures of one disciplinary approach, [and] what is missed" (Kincheloe, 2011, p. 179), the bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) I have created as I work through the challenges of my research is reactionary. It is a multi-faceted way to address difficulty and complexities that I encounter in research on digital communities. A more efficient, and perhaps more fruitful approach in seeking to illuminate and examine online communities, would be to proactively think through some of the principal hazards of undertaking digital research. Having, along with a set of signposts to indicate where these new challenges are likely to hide, a theoretical scaffold to address and work through these intimidating complexities would provide tools for that proactive approach. For a way to help consider the complexity and draw boundaries I turn to Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) concept of assemblage.

Deleuze and Guattari's Concept of Assemblage and its Utility in Thinking Through Digital Research

I come to use Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage through exploring developments in masculinities theory, and especially the work of Anna Hickey-Moody. In her work *Deleuze and Masculinity* (2019), Hickey-Moody uses the Deleuzian concepts of affect and assemblage to help rethink "the terms on which masculinity is constituted" and understand "cultural pedagogies of gender and analysing masculinity in terms of what it does, how it operates" (p. 11). She explains that the term assemblage "refers to the importance of context and highlights the fact that all acts/objects/bodies are, in fact, assemblages themselves and are *extensions of context* as much as they can also be singularized and seen to have individual agency" (p. 13, emphasis in original).

In sketching out how affect and assemblage can reconstitute masculinities theory, the interplay between the singular/individual, the multi-variate assemblage, and context becomes the only way available to (re)consider any individual outcome. So, nothing can be just the singular, because the singular can never exist in isolation, but can only exist in always-changing collections of other things – the singular is relative and contingent. So how we see and understand masculinity for any given person at any given time, is contingent not only on their person (body/representation), but on the socio-cultural moorings that tell us what masculinity should be (e.g., hegemonic masculinity), and our own personal relationships to both the body and the socio-cultural.

If we are willing to see digital landscapes, and therefore digital research as assemblage, it provides a way of thinking with complexity and to acknowledge its influence the same way that it can for masculinities. Assemblage becomes a point of reference that permits the researcher, to set an 'aesthetic' boundary in space and time for consideration – "it offers an odd, irregular, time-limited object for contemplation" (Marcus & Saka, 2006, p. 102) carved from the dizzying mess of sociality and digitality, "whose unity comes solely from the fact that they work together as a whole to produce something" (Feely, 2020, p. 179). It allows the researcher "to speak of emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred and the ephemeral" (p. 101) while keeping the research context manageable. Assemblage is simultaneously structured and loose, and must be employed with balance and tension between the maintenance of that structure for analysis and the consistent ability to change (Buchanan, 2021; Marcus & Saka, 2006). Putting assemblage to work with digital ethnographic methods, then, is a way to draw a kind of permeable boundary around part of the infinite complexity in online research, specific to the area we plan to study; a way to render it digestible. In doing the work of delineating the boundary, we also acknowledge what we have left outside of the line exists, and can have influence on the area that we study – that "a focus upon object A involves a neglect of object B" (Burke, 2018, p. 70). Like all research, research assemblages are political, in that they are constructed around the researcher and their positionality (Nail, 2017).

The work of acknowledging complexity, boundary setting, and structuration in assemblage is done through what Deleuze and Guattari call processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. A central axis of assemblage (along with the material/expressive)

deterritorialization and reterritorialization serve to destabilize and hold together assemblages as they mutate, break-up, and transform (Müller, 2015); "tendencies toward change and stasis" (Adkins, 2015, p. 49). "Territory," explains Buchanan (2021), "is a livable order produced and sustained by a refrain" (p. 85), or "a practice of place-making, a ritual or set of habits that embed people, animals or things in place" (Hickey-Moody, 2019, p. 15). This rather hermetic concept can be explained in a simple way using an apple.

> When an apple grows on a tree, it is territorialized on the tree. When I pick the apple, I deterritorialize the apple. At the same time, I also reterritorialize the apple by eating it or placing it in a fruit bowl. Of course, the process of de/reterritorialization extends infinitely in every direction. The apple only grows on the tree insofar as it is able to deterritorialize nutrients from the soil, energy from the sun, and pollen carried by insects and the wind. Each of these (soil, sun, insects) is in turn caught up in a process of de/reterritorialization. (Adkins, 2015, p. 49)

So, in the context of digital research, we can understand deterritorialization as the process of breaking down existing categories that make elements seem disconnected and easier to ignore (e.g., technological infrastructure as separate and independent from user texts). Re-territorialization is then the creation of new refrains, new assemblages that consider the essentialness of, for example, technological hardware in the production of digital discourses that we consume for research. The process of de- and re-structuring is essential to the utility of assemblage in its work with digital ethnography, as it always already pushes the researcher to consider a panoramic view of the rhizome that will contribute the constituents of the research. The rhizome being a heterogenous multiplicity where "elements co-exist with one another, but without [specific] structure. Any specific structure is imposed as an extra dimension … structuration or unification occurs as a result of 'over-coding' by a signifier" (Holland, 2013, p. 39). It is the everything, and demonstrates the non-linear connections of known and unknown actors.

Assemblage can also help the researcher to do the work of challenging the concept of subjectivity as they approach engagement with digital spaces. While we can be from "outside" – I am not a men's rights activist or an adherent to red pill ideology, for example – we cannot be separated from the network, technological infrastructures that connect us, or socio-political

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constructs that make up our study spaces. This enmeshment serves to solidify previous arguments about the intersubjectivity of the researcher and researched (Berbary, 2015; Rose & Johnson, 2020); "the post-humanist and relational politics of assemblages disrupt the dichotomies of inside and outside, self and other, and subject and object" (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020, p. 5). Ghoddousi and Page continue, "rather than an already-existing subject of study (e.g., individual human or political entities), assemblage theory foregrounds open multiplicities of relations that constitute the subject(s)" (p. 5).

Assemblage as Theory-Method: Applications for Digital Ethnography

There is an existing body of literature that draws lines between ethnography and assemblage theory, but these works largely address the crisis of representation. Baker and McGuirk (2017) provide a good entrée into this discussion in their call for the integration of ethnography and assemblage thinking in Australian policy research. They detail four important epistemological commitments of assemblage thinking (multiplicity, processuality, labour, and uncertainty), and explore how each might be actualised into research methods. The commitment to multiplicity, for example, is a strategy that helps method to never be locked into a single process or way of becoming in research outcomes, as multiplicity "displace[s] presumptions of structural coherence and determination" (T. Baker & McGuirk, 2017, p. 431); it necessarily maintains flexibility. The commitment to labour acknowledges that assemblages are not accidental, but come together through the work of (in the case of research projects) the researcher; "so their existence in particular configurations is something that must be continually worked at" (Prince (2010), p. 169 as cited in Baker & McGuirk, 2017, p. 432). These acts of reterritorialization are the ethnographic researcher delineating and rigorously maintaining their area of study, or it is likely to expand beyond their ability to manage (Wolcott, 2008). Fox and Alldred (2018) use Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage (as well as affects and capacities), in a kind of meta-Deleuzian maneuver to deconstruct the micropoliticality of research methods, including ethnography, and propose ways that those micropolitics could be used to reconstruct and improve methods rather than discard them. Masny (2014) goes as far as to propose that assemblage should push us to rupture the thought of using ethnography (in education) at all, instead moving to a rhizoanalysis "conditioned by a reality in which Deleuze and Guattari disrupt representation, interpretation and subjectivity" (p. 345).

Specific to digital ethnographic practice Taylor (2009) applies assemblage to game studies through "understanding [the game] as a lived object – as a playful artefact […] wherein many varying actors and unfolding processes make up the site and action" (p. 332). In doing so the important intersections of user experience and technological affordance connected to issues of access, familiarity, and socio-technical engagement with co-players are demonstrated, and provides a pragmatic way to visualize assemblage through the bounded artefact of player-system-game interrelation. Duggan (2017) questions whether digital ethnography reinforces problematic binary thinking between digital and real, or whether the practices of digital ethnography are just the evolution of 'conventional' ethnography where ubiquitous computing has made everything "constituent parts of digital assemblages" (p. 7). The consideration of the dividing line between digital and real as fuzzy, perforated, or dissolving is important, but in the case of developing research in digital landscapes, would ignore the unique and significant differences presented by digital communities. De Seta (2020) positions digital ethnography as a methodological assemblage insofar as it comes together differently for different researchers and in different ethnographic arrangements, and where modes of participation can be applied situationally, contingent on platform and identity. Møller and Robards (2019), for their part, suggest that assemblage is an integral part of how we have to view all qualitative methods used in digital spaces, including ethnography, in order to be able to properly contextualize the research and give it power. The argument to consider assemblage in qualitative methods is perhaps the most salient, as it speaks to the need for researchers to do the active work of reterritorialization when they engage in research online, but it is also vague in that it provides little indication about where to look, or how the application of assemblage might be truly helpful.

What these works lack is a set of signposts; suggestions about where researchers might spend their time and energy as they enter digital research – indications about how to take a wide view of the potential constituent parts of their research landscape, deconstruct existing ways of knowing that exclude certain elements from their research practice, and construct an area of study that better reflects the products of their research. The subsections that follow present this type of signpost through technological complexity, linearity and time, as well as engagement and familiarity.

The section on technological complexity lays out how the hidden and (sometimes) ignored elements of hardware and software are *always* implicated in digital research and its outcomes, and provides simple examples of how these factors can be considered when collecting and analysing digital data.[127] It then describes how these factors, especially software, directly contribute to the types of techno-sociality that are so interesting about online communities. The section on linearity and time addresses how the ability to freeze research spaces in their entirety means that time operates in different ways, and the assumed linearity in the passage of time is no longer a given but still a present consideration that must be attended to by the researcher. The final subsection on framing ways of engagement in digital ethnography through technological and platform expertise, brings forward how familiarity with the field site (an important part of ethnographic practice) goes beyond the social space of the community in question and the virtual space that community occupies. The technological and platform understandings of the researcher are essential to the research data and for the analysis of what those data say about community discourse. In concert with an applied theory of assemblage, and using examples from my own work on reddit, these points of consideration help to build a useable digital ethnographic assemblage theory-method that will serve to construct more robust and trustworthy[128] digital research.

Technological Complexity

The consideration of technology and its effects on the research process should be a given as we engage with digital research. Technologically-mediated layers of complexity that exist independently and concomitantly with other considerations in qualitative research like positionality (England, 1994), reflexivity (C. W. Johnson, 2009), and onto-epistemological perspective (Hesse-Biber, 2012). However, these technological considerations are sufficiently nuanced that they merit recognition and discussion by researchers engaged with digitality, and can be broken down into two categories: (1) challenges associated with the digital technologies

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[127] The use of technology and the complexity that comes along with that use is not exclusive to ethnographic work that takes place in online spaces and through online interactions. However, when the ethnographic project occurs online, we must contend with the technological tools of all ethnography (e.g., methods of recording observations, coding tools, computers for writing, email, etc.), along with specific considerations (e.g., platform design, interface, geophysical location, etc.) that are over and above those of any ethnographic project.

[128] Rose and Johnson (2020) describe trustworthiness as "the systematic rigor of the research design, the credibility of the researcher, the believability of the findings, and applicability of the research methods" (p. 434). It is, in other words, what we put in place to ensure that qualitative research is any good.

themselves across hardware and software; and (2) the techno-social considerations that make digital sociality different from in-person social interactions.

Hardware and Software

The more novel technological challenges for researchers working in digitality come from the often-ignored infrastructural elements of hardware and software. Hardware are the physical items that you use (computer, keyboard, screen, mobile phone, etc.) to engage with digital data; software are the instructions that make hardware do the work of digital computing. Even though hardware are the actual, physical elements of our digital lives and technological interactions, unless devices or other physical-technological items are expressly part of our inquiry, we tend to ignore them. But when we do research on digital communities and their outputs, hardware can really matter. Take, for example, how the researcher is accessing communities (say desktop, mobile device, or combination of both) and how that compares to the ways that participants or community members are accessing content. While considerations like this might seem mundane, the experience of accessing my research site, reddit.com, is different on a desktop device than it is on a mobile device as users see less content at one time, and require more steps to interact with non-post content like the sidebar (figure 7-3). While these differences are always mediated by software, the physical experiences of working with different hardwares is significant (e.g., using a touch keyboard on the small screen of your phone is very different than using the keyboard at your PC). If we accept that changes in physical user experience will change how users act, react, and participate (something we accept to be true of non-digital experiences), we must acknowledge that our own means of accessing and analysing online communities have significant impacts on our research.

Looking even deeper, the physical items the user (or researcher) can touch are only the surface layer of hardware, and scholars like Lisa Parks' (2015) call for increased focus on the elements of the media network infrastructure that we often take for granted. Parks suggests that we should consider all the digital intermediaries between the researcher and the user (an unknown number of servers, switches, routers, packets, cables, wireless signals, processors, and more), at least in theory and concept, as those pieces of infrastructure and how they function (or do not) have significant impacts on the user and researcher.
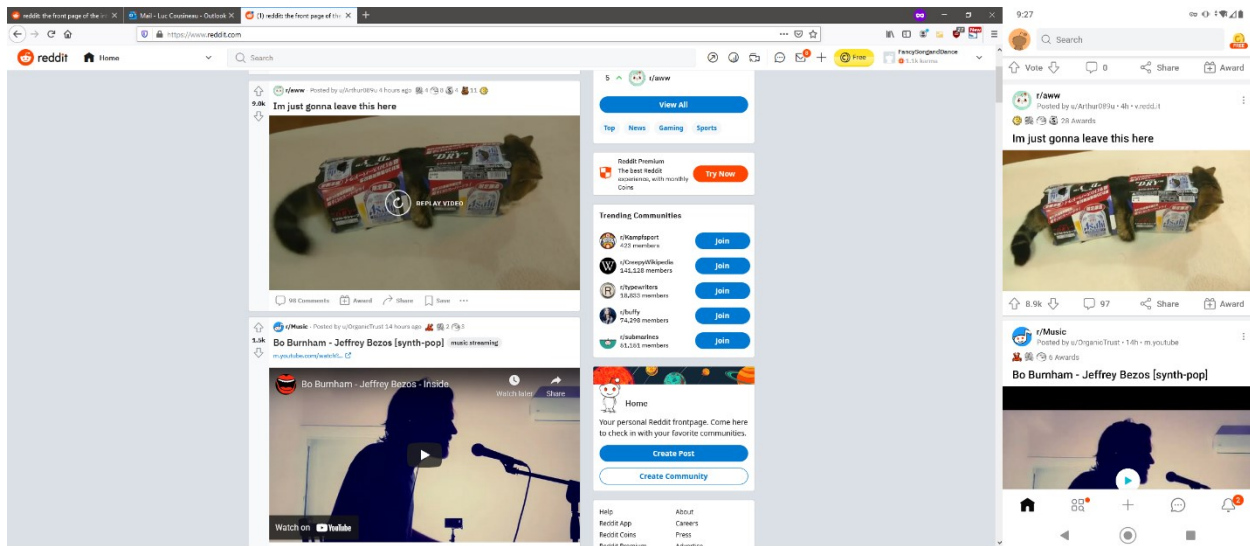
Figure 7-3: Screen captures of desktop version (left) and mobile version (right) of the reddit landing page - May 31, 2021.

In this discussion I have (so far) only passively included software considerations, where software are sets of instruction that make hardware "do work." Software creates the digital world, especially the global networked digital world, controls what you see, and the processes that occur behind that scene in providing specific user experiences. In the case of online social platforms like reddit, software sets boundaries and makes decisions about who sees what on the site. But software does not appear out of nowhere, and the people who build software (by writing code) leave something of themselves behind; their motivations or biases influence design and decision-making (Breland, 2017; Lo, 2016). Knowing that the creators of digital worlds write themselves into their code adds a dizzying meta-social aspect to thinking about software in qualitative research. Not only do we need to consider the software used in our digital research and research sites themselves as constituents and active influencers of research data, in some cases the person behind the code is so deeply entrenched in the software product that they become an object of interest as we explore the digital experience (Hall, 2016). If the developer/coder works for an organization (like reddit), then the politics of the organization are also in play insofar as our considerations of influence on our data (Noble, 2018b). For example, reddit (the company) decides what content is shown on the site and how it is displayed and organized. Reddit in 2010 was very different (more racist, violent, hateful) than reddit today (although some of those issues persist), and these changes have much to do with investment

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capital and potential profit margins (Needleman, 2021), not the social good. This line of reasoning could reasonably continue toward the abstract.

Turning away from the meta-social to the technical, not all platforms are designed for easy, mass consumption like reddit or Facebook. It is possible that the researcher may require specialized knowledge about how to interact, or even access certain communities – this was certainly the case in pre- (and early) internet digital ethnographic work (e.g. Nardi, 1996; Rheingold, 1993), and continues with, for example, ethnographies of the dark web (Gehl, 2016).

The examples above illustrate the significance of considering hardware and software in digital ethnographic research, but they are often ignored by "regular" research on digital platforms. I see two significant reasons for this omission: invisibility and ignorance. The first, invisibility, comes from these technological elements serving as infrastructures for digital experience, and therefore are "by definition invisible, part of the background for other kinds of work" (Star, 1999, p. 380). Like other infrastructures we use them without thinking about them – "turn on the faucet for a drink of water and you use a vast infrastructure of plumbing and water regulation" (p. 380). The second contributor to our omission in this area is simple ignorance. If you do not know about the complicated water infrastructure that allows you to have safe running water in your home,[129] then you will not consider these things when getting your drink.

The same concepts are true of digital infrastructures and digital research – if you do not know about the impacts and interplays of hardware and software on user experience, then you will omit these important considerations. As digital infrastructures, hardware and software are territorialized through invisibility and foreignness as inconsequential, yet their enormous influence on users and researchers demands that we cross this artificial line and include them in our research planning and analysis. To do this I suggest working outward from your platform of choice, so if you choose to examine Twitter, or Facebook, or reddit in your research, make sure that you are familiar with that platform before you build your research plan. Doing so ensures that you are re-coding, for example, the software affordances (or what Twitter/Facebook/reddit allows you to do) into your research plan. In my own research, although I was familiar with reddit before I began, spending time exploring the default and optional sorting mechanisms built

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[129] Just a note that not everyone (even in "advanced" nations like Canada) have safe running water in their homes, especially indigenous communities.

into the platform would have helped me make more informed decisions about which ways they would be valuable to my inquiry. While sorting by popular and controversial worked for me in the end, it required working around a change in the platform that eliminated controversial sorting by default. The process of deterritorializing digital infrastructures requires a kind of pre-project labour on the part of the researcher to understand how elements might be incorporated into the digital ethnographic assemblage. But this labour is necessarily fruitful as it generates more fulsome arguments about the techno-sociality of digital spaces that we explore in digital ethnography.

Techno-Sociality

Deeply connected to the hardware and software considerations I have explained above are techno-social considerations, or issues of internet sociality that are mostly unique to digital research and its participants. The most common of these considerations of sociality, especially in online communities like reddit that function with layers of quasi-anonymity for their users (Carlson & Cousineau, 2020; Richterich, 2014), is user identity. The dated, but still useful meme 'Nobody knows you're a dog on the internet' (figure 7-4) is a tongue-in-cheek way of explaining that for the average user (or researcher) it is very

Figure 7-4: Dog on the Internet comic/meme – © Peter Steiner, The New Yorker, July 5, 1993

difficult to know if online user personas are accurate reflections of their offline selves, or if they are even real people at all (e.g., bots). While they are not likely to be dogs, the act of catfishing[130] is common enough online that it has received extensive academic and popular media attention. Users online can obfuscate their identities in ways that are impossible when connecting offline, and so this uncertainty of user representation is a factor in research decision-making. To

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[130] Catfishing is the purposeful misrepresentation by a user in order to deceive another, often done in the context of luring or coercing someone else into compromising or embarrassing situations (Lauckner et al., 2019).

complicate (or perhaps uncomplicate) this further, we may decide that 'accuracy' of representation is a non-issue for the study of online communities and users, because what happens in the community is true and accurate representation of its members. If this is the case, then issues of offline/online identity congruence or 'truth' in representation are irrelevant. Considering virtual identities as truly constituent or representative of fulsome personal identity is itself an act of deterritorialization of the idea that the virtual, or online, is somehow set apart from the "real world" of the user. Disallowing the virtual vs. real contrast for user behaviour reterritorializes online user actions as indicative of the person behind the computer and changes the ways that techno-sociality must be considered as we research online communities – especially if we intend to examine group discourse and/or ideology.

The considerations around user identity and representation are just one of the possible issues of the techno-social researchers should account for before they enter and study online communities. Again here, like with hardware and software considerations, taking a broad view and making conscious decisions in building a research assemblage is necessary for building better, more trustworthy digital ethnographic research.

Linearity and Time

The second set of signposts I want to provide are about the interconnected concepts of linearity and time. Colloquially, we understand that 'time passes,' and so it is simple to think of time as a linear measure that can provide a certain type of context to research data and findings. But asynchronous digital spaces (like reddit), where posts are not organized along linear timelines, makes a linear understanding of time and products of the digital community messy.

Where the ethnography of, for example, a country and western gay bar occurs in one time zone and week after week along a linear progression of time, posts, interactions, and discussions on online platforms (like reddit) have a kind of temporal wiggle-room. What I mean is that while threads accumulate content as time passes, the inter-referential nature of that content is not necessarily linear. How content appears for users (on reddit and many other platforms) is influenced by when it was posted, but also by user engagement, meaning that the more users engage with content, the more likely it is to appear at the top of the page for other users. The creation of a non-linear feed of posts and information is the sorting algorithm at work, and a tangible example of the previously discussed pervasive influence of software and its creators on

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user experience. In my research, popular posts that appeared in my systematic data collection were as new as one hour and as old as six days when they appeared in the top five, and throughout the data collection popular posts were never organized chronologically by when they were posted. Comments and sub-threads may take place over several hours or days, with participants in the conversation coming and going or revisiting the conversation at another time. What makes this different from in-person interactions is that the lapse in time is inconsequential (at least in the short term) as the conversation exists in a kind of stasis between comments, not fading, but continuing to exist in the fleeting digital permanence that is online interaction. Interactions do not have to be linear or synchronized on platforms like reddit, as I can comment on old posts, move to new ones, and back again. Nor do posts have to reflect the newest external content, and my research often uncovered new conversations (in 2020) about news articles from 2014 and before (e.g. u/C0sm1cB3ar, 2020).

Extending from considerations of the break-down of linearity in digital research are considerations of time, and specifically the ability to freeze entire communities at a moment and in perpetuity, and to return to that moment as often as desired. Different from the previous discussion on linearity (a focus on sequence), the ability to freeze time provides a different kind of ethnographic experience (a chance for full experience at any time). The most basic exercises in ethnographic observation teach would-be ethnographers that it is impossible to capture the complete essence of the research space as too much is happening, too much is changing, and time passes too quickly (Preissle & Grant, 2004). Ethnographic approaches like Pink's (2009) sensory ethnography and Gullion's (2018) diffractive ethnography encourage the researcher to take in more and see their research differently, but neither purports to be able to give a full account of the research space in a given moment. Digital ethnographic practice (in settings of asynchronous communication[131]) can allow this to happen in a limited way by creating a snapshot, but the value of that snapshot is contingent. While the snapshot might give us something frozen in time that can maintain the connections and diversions that are present at that time and in that place, assemblage thinking should help us understand that it remains limited, contingent, and porous. What is preserved in the snapshot is unique and specific. The reddit

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[131] Synchronous communication, like chat, or livestreaming makes this more difficult, but not impossible. It is feasible that the digital ethnographer could capture those interactions as video and watch and re-watch them as if they were live, to attempt a fulsome report of the research space.

content presented in my research captures comes onto my screen via the tailored content filters that are constructed through my subscriptions and activity. It is always contingent on the voting activity of others that influences what content I see in my own feed. The connections and diversions to outside that are associated with, but not captured in, my snapshots are subject to change at any time. What I see in snapshots is also contingent on the software that I use to capture, view, and interact with those snapshots. All these connections are part of the matrix of considerations that assemblage encourages us to engage with.

When I load a reddit page, for example, even as conversations are happening between users the page itself is static. Nothing changes while I browse until I either navigate away and return, or reload the page. As part of data collection, I can capture these static moments, and reviewing them later shows no change from the original – the experience of immersion in the content remains the same.[132] The ability to freeze time, and if we choose to exercise that ability, has significant impact on the ethnographic research product and the kind of granularity that can be applied to analysis. The critique of this approach, this freezing and transposing of time, is that it captures a static image of a living thing, a kind of research taxidermy where the hidden, living insides of the research space are replaced with static polyester filling. But the asynchronicity of reddit content means that those moments of live-ness occur between the static moments in time presented to the user; background, live infrastructural processes that permit and challenge freezing time.

The deconstruction of a presumptive linearity in digital content and research data, so understanding that the content we are consuming is not necessarily presented to us in a linear way, troubles another assumption about digital data collected over time. It disambiguates digital content as occurring in a straightforward way, and helps to understand how a researcher might get disoriented in stacked and tangential presentations of that content. Time as an organizing and predictable way to understand data and experience is then deterritorialized and re-inscribed as an important part of the research assemblage. This consideration and reterritorialization of time allows for non- and quasi-linear[133] approaches to content because that content is itself quasi-

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[132] Acknowledging that the researcher is never 'the same' from point to point, and the research experienced in different ways because of this.

[133] Meaning is sometimes linear and sometimes not, and linear presentations do not follow identical timelines – so conversations in comments may take place over several minutes, hours, days, or longer.

linear. While dislocating time as a central axis of consideration complicates the research experience (things are easier to keep track of if they are linear after all), it allows for different kinds of crystallization in analysis and research outcomes (Ellingson, 2009; Richardson, 2000).

Engagement and Familiarity

The final signposts for consideration in the digital ethnographic assemblage theory-method begin the process of meta-reflection on how elements come together in research decision-making. How the researcher considers and chooses modes of engagement in the digital ethnographic project, and how those decisions reflect researcher familiarity with the research site are essential to making this theory-method work and understanding its implications.

If we understand community participation to be contingent on content production and contribution (Bateman et al., 2011; Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017; Nimrod, 2014), then two things must be true: (1) we limit how we can talk about a community, and who we talk about, based on those people who 'contribute' in a certain way; and (2) as ethnographers we are therefore obligated to contribute to the communities we study, if we are going to approach the kinds of effective community integration we might seek in 'deep hanging out' (Wogan, 2004) or 'going native' (Hastrup, 1990). If, on the other hand, we choose to consider the listener as an essential and important member of the community (as I did), the ethnographer can be a full community participant without contributing to the flow of content. Either approach is acceptable, although the act of listening as ethnographic practice has been slower to find acceptance, especially in more traditional ethnographic lensing (Aouragh, 2018; Howell, 2017). But this decision is not binary, and there are modes of engagement that fall somewhere between being fully a listener and a consistent content contributor.

What does it mean as a digital ethnographer of social media spaces if, rather than producing new content, we only engage through voting mechanisms (like up and down votes on reddit, or 'liking' things on Facebook)? What if as part of a twitter ethnography we only like and retweet but never add any created content? These are regular modes of user participation in each of these digital spaces, so what could they mean for digital ethnographers? These questions call me to think about re-coding what it means to be a 'participant' in online communities, and by association what it can mean to do research in those same spaces. The process of deterritorializing the participant/non-participant binary (work which is already underway with

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the transition from concepts of lurking to listening), necessarily reconstructs participation as a spectrum, and provides the potential to represent more subsets of users in our work. The issues with this approach are three-fold, in that: (1) decisions about engagement should not be made without deep consideration of the implications of that decision (what is gained and/or lost when we listen vs. like vs. actively contribute content); (2) each approach requires different kinds of time commitment; and (3) the quality of data and engagement that a researcher can have in any participation scenario along the spectrum is contingent on their familiarity with the platform(s) they choose as study site(s). The fundamental decision about where you land on the listen-like-produce spectrum has significant ripple effects across the entire project.

While issues one and two have been covered in chapter three, issue three deserves some additional explanation. Each online platform has a different interface, different user affordances, and different desired user outcomes. The amount of time required to be able to effectively engage with the platform, and subsequently the subcommunities on that platform, varies. Reddit, for example, is relatively simple to navigate, and the new (registered) user onboarding starts off with tailored content from their first visit. However, each sub-community has its own rules, own modes of engagement, and own social codes that require time (and reading) to learn (see Van Valkenburgh, 2021). These social codes are items that we need to know and understand thoroughly enough to be able to conduct trustworthy research. Researcher familiarity with the platform and communities they choose to study may have significant impact on where ethnography begins and the modes of engagement that we choose. It also allows us to deconstruct participation and add different types of usership and researcher involvement to the consideration of our research assemblage. As a researcher engaging with digital ethnography to explore discourses of masculinity within /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, I needed to be familiar with the specific subreddit techno-social practices to properly interpret and explore those discourses. My previous experience with reddit and both subcommunities meant that my targeted ethnographic work could begin immediately, and that I could engage with and understand those discourses from the position of a listener. Someone new to reddit, or even new to these communities would either need to spend a good deal of time familiarizing themselves with the communities before beginning their targeted work, or would need to recontextualize their ethnography to incorporate the learning about the community and the affordances of the reddit platform. This is the same type of decision-making about digital ethnographic projects

encountered by researchers like Holt (2011), who had to spend many months as a player of World of Warcraft before he was ready to engage in his 'elfnography,' but framed as a guidepost to help researchers think through decisions in building a research program through assemblage, rather than in *post hoc* panic.

The Bounding of the Digital Ethnographic Assemblage Theory-Method – the Research Technoassemblage

The work of robust, trustworthy research design is never simple, and acts of consciously recognizing the complexities of research through considerations of positionality (England, 1994), reflexivity (C. W. Johnson, 2009; Pillow, 2003), subjectivity (Davis, 2012; Fullagar, 2008), power (Arai & Kivel, 2009; Mowatt, 2012), and onto-epistemological decision-making (Berbary & Boles, 2014) should be consistent elements in that work. But the practice of digital ethnography, as embedded in digital communities that are contingent on unique elements of technology and time requires a dedicated approach to addressing complexity before we begin. The frontloading of that complexity in research design can come through theory and Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage, as it allows for the recognition of rhizomatic complexity while bounding a research site that is flexible but digestible. Assemblage theory alone is not productive however, as it merely allows us to think differently, but using the deterritorialization/reterritorialization axis of assemblages with the unique elements of digital ethnography, allows us to create theory-method signposts for future research design.

All research begins with an area or community of interest; deciding what to study is the easy part. What comes next is the 'how' of study, and texts, guidebooks, and process manuals, while providing excellent foundational methods and methodological considerations, often miss the important work of individualization and unique consideration required when examining new, niche, or socially contentious groups. They often lack the necessary nuance required for the special considerations of, for example, a quasi-anonymous, quasi-linear, social content aggregating web community like reddit. The digital ethnographic assemblage theory-method encourages the type of nuanced thinking needed in these situations, and to do that thinking as part of the research design process rather than as ways to justify decisions made without proper consideration or understanding.

The signposts provided in this paper, considerations of technological complexity, linearity and time, engagement and familiarity, are meant as stopping points and points of consideration in the process of design. They encourage the researcher to think about (perhaps for the first time) how each of them has direct and consequential influence on the research process, data, and outcomes. Especially if the considerations are new (and even if they are not), contemplating them as part of a research assemblage encourages their deterritorialization as separate and isolated from the digital ethnographic process, and reinscribes them, in whole or in part, as direct and agentic elements of digital research. The power of assemblage, beyond providing a flexible bounded object of consideration, is that it allows for relational and territorialized elements to have tendencies toward stasis and change (Adkins, 2015; T. Baker & McGuirk, 2017). It means that rather than providing a set of restrictive and prescriptive research modalities (e.g., Kozinets, 2015), it gives the researcher a series of starting points and new ways to consider their digital research.

The work in this paper also provides readers of research conducted in the digital new ways to evaluate that research. It will help those reading and evaluating that research to ask questions about the technological positionality of the researchers, and whether they have considered the important contribution of technological infrastructures to the research findings. It will help them ask questions about how the researchers see engagement and time in research, and hopefully question whether the researchers know anything about their research space. These are perhaps the most important contributions of a digital ethnographic assemblage theory-method, in that they encourage us to push elements of trustworthiness, reflexivity, and deep considerations of research into the (relatively) new domain of digital inquiry. Through these considerations, we also contribute to the growing body of work that legitimises and solidifies digital inquiry in our research toolboxes in an increasingly digital world.

Staying Oriented: Using Guideposts

Having cleaned up the debris left over from the hurricane that is a 15-month-old, I have taken my tea and my attention to the collection of reddit posts that are the bulk of empirical materials for my research project. Using laptop and extra screen, wireless mouse and keyboard, noise cancelling headphones, and a set of software tools to capture, document, annotate, and copy content, I read posts harvested – capturing my own version

of them, their order, comments, and appearance as reddit presents them to me for later analysis (figure 7-5). Every bit of information contained in my captures is influenced by my user presence on reddit, the voting and commenting activity of others, the browser or app I choose to view the content, and the intra-group policing done by moderators and other users. While I can take in the content and discuss the discourses of a community, that discussion is always contingent and specific.

Figure 7-5: My basement workspace - with plants for sanity.

My workspace, even when it is "tidy" is always a kind of organized chaos of analogue and digital materials that all contribute to my work. I follow links, reaching out from my home technology through a complex web of infrastructure, to other places online. I watch videos, see images, and read articles of varying quality, washed over by content and a digital ocean of research data.

Checking my spreadsheet notes and opening my digital notebook, I navigate to the next post in my series and the familiar image of reddit appears, with the addition of my data catalogue sidebar (figure 7-6). This post critiques what the author calls the 'deep hypocrisy of feminism', and links to a YouTube video of a women's march protest during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are over 600 comments (probably someone over 20,000 words) and I know there will be some repetition as I work through the comments, some common refrains (e.g., the ubiquitous anti-feminism from all posts in this community, and a general distain for women), and tangential discussions that will draw attention away from the original topic. These are all elements at the intersection of reddit's design that does funny things to time and are relative to how I (and other users) engage with that design.
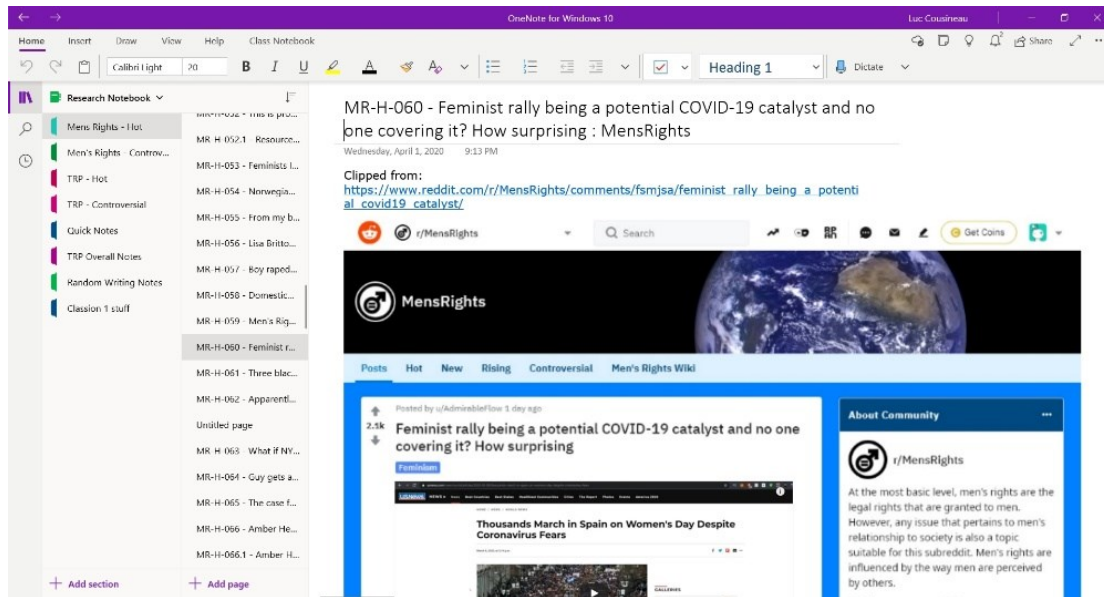
Figure 7-6: Screenshot of reddit data capture in researcher digital data notebook.

An hour later, I have read hundreds of user comments on all kinds of issues, and I have just finished a sub-thread of comments on comments on comments detailing the problems brought about by the 'socially accepted practice of hypergamy in modern women.' Hypergamy, I remind myself, is the term used by men's rights advocates to describe the practice of women always seeking 'higher status' partners as a biological imperative that overrides 'common sense.' This is a common refrain in men's rights circles and usually seems to come from men who have experienced failed relationships. In this instance it feels whiny, but it usually does since it is a mechanism for men to blame the failures of their own relationships (and themselves) on women and biology – not surprisingly, it is never their fault.

After noting the discussion on hypergamy in my research notes on screen 2, I return to the data screen (screen 1) with the intention of continuing to work my way through tonight's post. The next comment begins an entirely new sub-thread, and all the reading and long discussion on hypergamy have taken my attention in many directions. Returning to the data screen and reading the start of the new line of comments, I realise that I can't remember the original post or topic area of this thread – how did I get here? This loss of place happens sometimes, especially in long threads, but I remember it being something vaguely anti-feminist, although that could just be the brain fog of reading content from an overly

and aggressively anti-feminist source all evening. Everything here is anti-feminist at some level. But the content of these threads moves and shifts, follows tangents, then (sometimes) returns to a focus – this is a feature of reddit, not a bug. It is like the water of a river spilling over its banks, finding ways to move and pool away from the original path, or sometimes coming back to rejoin the flow; where the conversation goes doesn't always make sense.

I leave a small annotation on my image to remind me where I left off – one of the benefits of leveraging my research technology – remembering that reddit organizes comments to reference their parents, not the original post. Some are older and some newer, but that doesn't really matter for what I'm doing now. I scroll up through my data image. I go up through the sub-thread I have just finished reading, to the parent comment that started it. Up past that to find its own parent comment, and the real root of that sub-thread. Then up, and up, and up through all the comments reddit tells me are more popular and their sub-threads, until finally I get back to the top of the page and the original post. It is indeed anti-feminist, and is direct about it. The women's march – I remember now. I scan back down to my mark and continue reviewing the comments. I am tired (this is a long post), but I am almost done. Today I have been able to use my research tech and my knowledge of reddit to keep my analysis straight, and now I can sleep.

8 : Conclusion

I began the process of crafting this dissertation because I wanted to write about men on the internet, and how they discussed men's issues in communities dedicated men's rights ideas. These communities bothered me on a base level when I encountered them in my digital activity, and I wanted to understand why. To do so, I took on digital ethnographic methods and began a project exploring the discourses of masculinity in men's rights communities on reddit. Reddit was familiar to me, a place I felt comfortable and engaged as a user, and a place where I knew I could find different approaches to men, masculinities, and men's issues. I asked: (1) What discourses of masculinity are embedded in the reddit manosphere spaces of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, how do they compare, and how are these discourses disseminated and monitored to maintain collective group ideologies? and (2) What role might reddit play, through /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, in connecting manosphere communities, and pushing users toward more radical viewpoints about gender and power? From asking these questions and doing the labour of research to answer them, a third important question emerged, not about reddit or the manosphere, but about doing digital research itself: What indicators or guideposts would have been useful as a novice digital qualitative researcher to help me better plan, develop, conduct, and theorise my digital ethnographic research?

I was interested in investigating a leisure space and area of social interaction that resonated with me on a personal level; not a space where I saw myself as a member necessarily, but one that was not so far removed from my current positionality that it felt distant and/or obscure. I have always been interested in spaces where gender, power, privilege, and control intersect, and the discourses of masculinities, power, and control in men's rights groups on reddit was an appropriate place to continue that work. I also wanted to contribute to the body of knowledge on contemporary men's rights and manosphere communities online, the influence that conceptualizations of masculinities had within these groups, and hopefully better understand how we might mitigate their anti-equity worldviews. Lastly, I found I had something to say about digital methods, digitality, and research in the field of leisure studies. The work in this dissertation brings together these elements through the theoretical approaches outlined in the opening chapters, and the manuscripts that discuss gendered configurations of practice, technological affordances for right-wing groups, and the complexities of doing digitally

mediated research. The remainder of this chapter summarises the work of this project and discusses what inquiry remains unshared or remains to be explored from this data. It then considers notes for leisure scholars, additional items for future inquiry, and my challenges and concerns as I conclude this research.

Here we are.

The work of this dissertation is a kind of meta-assemblage; a collection of connected elements (chapters on theory, method, and manuscripts – each themselves an assemblage) selected from a much larger set that made up my research project (N. J. Fox & Alldred, 2018). That research project is itself an assemblage constructed from the innumerable possibilities in social interaction. Certain things are included, others are left out, and "it offers an odd, irregular, time-limited object for contemplation ... with a certain tension, balancing, and tentativeness" that comes with representing social settings for textual consumption (Marcus & Saka, 2006, p. 102). What I have done in the manuscript portion of this integrated dissertation is to pull from my research journey three important elements, and present them in a way that demonstrates to the reader the granular, socio-cultural, and theory-methodological implications of projects like mine. The significance of these elements is borne out in the manuscript chapters of this document, each standing alone but also contributing to a larger discussion about the study of men's rights and platformed masculinities. The order of the manuscripts presented here constructs a meta-narrative about my work in a certain place and time, done in a certain way, and demonstrates how my thinking moved from a focus on granular data, through broader social influences, and finally to theory-level methodological considerations.

The first manuscript chapter (chapter 4), *"Entitled to everything responsible for nothing:" Gendered Discourses of Antifeminism, Biological Determinism, and Violence in Two Communities of Reddit's Manosphere,* examines the complementary and contrasting discourses of masculinity at play between /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. This manuscript explores, compares, and contrasts three gendered discursive practices manifest in these two reddit communities. Examining user posts and community generated content, I situate these two groups' claims to antifeminism, fundamental differences between men and women, and the leveraging of violence (broadly understood), as overlapping ways of claiming masculinities, unified within the manosphere but divergent between groups. Despite both being part of the

manosphere, the ways these two groups express their ideological standpoints and situate themselves as ideological-oriented communities, set them apart from one another. My critique extends our knowledge about how the masculinities of the manosphere, and their socio-political implications, are significant and growing problems as we seek to fashion a more just society.

The second manuscript chapter (chapter 5), *"A Positive Identity for Men"? Pathways to far-right participation through Reddit's /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill*, builds from the established scholarship on anti-feminist and male supremacist rhetorics in the manosphere (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Krendel, 2020; Van Valkenburgh, 2021), and the work of the preceding chapter (chapter 4, this volume), to show how reddit provides affordances[134] for the development of collectivity and community for people with non-normative, anti-feminist ideological values. These affordances are valuable to these men's groups - who are adjacent to the far-right for their obsessions with Western gender traditionalisms, and in some cases male supremacy - allowing the proliferation and radicalization of ideas through echo chambered exposure in closed communities with limited censorship. This chapter explores how /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill occupy different parts of the men's rights spectrum, situates these communities as part of the ideological right (Bobbio, 1996), and demonstrates how reddit's design can make them part of a pipeline pushing community members toward more extreme views. This chapter does the work of demonstrating that the impacts of misogynist content extend beyond individuals and individual community discourses, and can leverage platform and technological affordances to spread through loosely connected networks like the manosphere. It suggests, through this demonstration, that technological affordances should be essential considerations when researching online communities and their cultural impacts.

The final manuscript chapter (chapter 6), *Application of a Digital Ethnographic Assemblage Theory-Method – the Research Technoassemblage*, is written from the lessons I learned as I worked my way through the research process and the act of digital ethnographic work on contentious reddit communities. Where chapter four explored the granular data I collected, chapter five took that data in context with other work on manosphere communities and began to integrate reddit's technological contingencies. It shows the significant implications that

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[134] As a reminder, affordance is used here to mean the interactions between the objective qualities of a given technology, and the subjective perception by the individual of the utility of that technology. Affordances, when understood in this way, are relational and specific – a kind of perception of utility (Schrock, 2015)

come from the intersections of user, technology, and ideology. Chapter six takes up theory-method to uncover the lessons I learned about elements of technological complexity, time, and researcher engagement, through my research, analysis, and writing processes. The chapter begins by framing a disorientation in digital ethnographic research that, when considered retroactively and reflexively, could have been partially mitigated with a better set of theoretical/methodological guideposts. Knowing about, and thinking through technologies and their contributions to my work, what effects time has on data and how it is moderated, and my own familiarity and means of engagement with digital data would have muted or eliminated some of my confusion, and made my research more efficient. After explaining the use and value of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage, this chapter lays out a collection of non-sequential guideposts to help researchers better understand, frame, and account for significant considerations of digitality in research. The intended audience for this work of theory-method are those researchers familiar with the complexities of thoughtful and contemplative qualitative research, but less familiar with the ways digitality and digital research spaces affect these well-known considerations. The signposts provided in this chapter are meant as stopping points and points of consideration in the process of research design. By providing places to stop and consider, I encourage the researcher to think about (perhaps for the first time) how each of these signposts has direct and consequential influence on digitally mediated research processes, data, and outcomes. For those evaluating research enmeshed with digitality, or using it to learn, the signposts provide points of consideration of the thoroughness and robustness of that work.

So what?

Taken together, these manuscripts demonstrate the kind of stacked knowledge generation required to build robust analysis and critiques of digital socio-cultural spaces – especially those that do anti-equity work. They show how, beginning with observational and forum post data from individual users, we can build understandings about the discourses and narratives that are occurring in "unloved" communities (Fielding, 1990); communities most researchers choose not to research because they are offensive, off putting, or downright scary. This dissertation contributes to the literatures on the manosphere, reddit, and leisure studies, provides methodological insights, and begins to discuss important perspectives on the methodological choices for researchers who choose a non-traditional path in their digital ethnographic work.

The Manosphere

Inquiry on the manosphere has seen an explosion of popularity in the last five years, with that inquiry focused largely on communities like the Red Pill and incels.[135] As with the initial rush of academic work on any social phenomenon, much of the research in this area is expository and works to establish the larger cultural positionality of communities like /r/TheRedPill (e.g., Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019; Mountford, 2018; Van Valkenburgh, 2021). The labour of illuminating that these communities exist, as well as highlighting their discourses and ideologies, can be tremendously valuable. During this five-year project, I have lost track of the number of people who have told me that the existence of this kind of community was shocking to them. But they do exist, and we should not be shocked, or even surprised. Less work has been done on comparing groups within the manosphere, and especially discussing the differences between these groups (with notable exceptions, e.g., Ging, 2019b). The value of moving to comparison after the expository phase is that by understanding difference within the manosphere, we can expose fractures and discontents that could serve to slow or disrupt the flow of ideas and people between groups.

It is simple enough to demonstrate ways that /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill compliment, co-construct, and feed one into the other, helping to sustain and grow ideology, rhetoric, and user numbers. An open search of /r/MensRights on the live version of reddit for "red pill" yields hundreds of results (total unknown because they are shown as infinite scroll). From my own dataset, examples are easy enough to locate – "Take the red pill and wake up" (/u/Hansson2); "TLDR I have taken the red pill, and I couldn't be happier" (/u/AlpacaPunch2105); or "Fair bit of warning though : once you have redpill knowledge, you will never be able to go back to seeing the world as you see now" (/u/ezragriffin). While this kind of inter-referential connection might seem mundane, the rhetoric of /r/TheRedPill is demonstrably focused on a kind of male supremacism that is meant to recapture or solidify (certain) men's control over others, especially women (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019; Mountford, 2018; chapter 5, this volume). Contrasted with /r/MensRights' appeal to a kind of victimhood (C. R. Kelly, 2020), the rhetorics of self-discipline and appeals to biological imperatives of

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[135] I am referring specifically to the Red Pill movement more broadly, although there is some research on /r/TheRedPill. Also, misogynist incels would likely resist their inclusion in the manosphere, as would other groups within the manosphere, but their dedication to anti-feminism and other ideological positions causes me to include them more often than not.

superiority in /r/TheRedPill lend themselves to justifications of male domination and control (physical, emotional, financial, etc.) of others – again, especially women.

> It really doesn't matter if you see it yet, live long enough and you will, you'll start noticing more and more "cracks in the matrix."
> "The matrix" is a set of gynocentric cultural assumptions that portray a false narrative that women are "oppressed" (they're not) and that men have it good (we don't.) (/u/DubsPackage - /r/MensRights)

> Guys posting on here, caring about women, is not out of the realm of TRP. Letting women control them is. (/u/betatest2020 - /r/TheRedPill)

> TRP is Biology - Only the Truth Matters (/u/itiswr1tten - /r/TheRedPill)

The comparison between these communities, while interesting on its own, is especially useful in the ways that it can add to discussions about how individuals are radicalized within internet cultures, particularly male supremacist and far-right spaces. Reddit affords users a through-put between communities so that, for example, reading about the "cultural assumptions" that control the lives of men, can push them to content that helps understand feelings of being controlled (especially by women) as a loss of power (Cornwall, 2016; Manne, 2017). That same content might position power as a perceived biological imperative for men – and so a loss of power is not only a challenge to male entitlement (C. R. Kelly, 2020; Manne, 2020), but also an affront to nature itself. If the decline of male control is an affront to nature, then feelings of loss, the need to cast blame, and anger over the unacknowledged 'right' to sex from women by men would not seem out of step with reality (Basu, 2020; Cousineau, 2021c; Ging, 2019b).

Like others who have researched male supremacism before me (DiBranco, 2020; Ebin, 2021; Preston et al., 2021), I raise these concerns and highlight these connections not to be a fearmonger, but to raise the alarm – **we should be alarmed by this!** While violence from members of the men's rights or red pill communities is rare, it is not unheard of (see the story that opens this dissertation). Even with more robust content controls on major sites like reddit, they (and the internet more broadly) remain places where this type of supremacist and (potentially) violent ideology takes hold and proliferates. How these groups align with one another is key to their functioning in the manosphere, and it provides a means of organizing and cross-pollination. We can also see how they contribute as groups and a collective to the politicisation of anti-equity worldviews through pro-individualistic and anti-feminist action.

My work also gives more time to /r/MensRights, a group that I will describe as less 'exciting' than some others, like misogynist incels for example. Less radical and less menacing (although also capable of violence), /r/MensRights gets relatively less academic and media attention. The lesser attention it receives is unsurprising as their violence is less overt (and therefore makes less sellable/clickable content), but I think their more clandestine violence makes them more menacing – both as a gateway into deeper recesses of male supremacy and far-right ideology (see chapter 6), and as a venue for the public exposure and consumption of the soft misogyny (J. A. Dunlap, 2016; Manne, 2017) practiced in men's rights. Being less radical, or seen as less crazy, allows the adherents to men's rights doctrine some additional access to space and time.

The issues under discussion when we compare /r/MensRights with /r/TheRedPill are telling of this difference in level of public exposure and connection. Posts in /r/TheRedPill are dominated by long text posts that are mostly from the minds of the users: personal stories, advice, questions, social commentary – e.g., "Romantics of the Red Pill: Billy Beta and the Disney Girl" (/u/VasiliyZaitzev), "Stop giving a fuck about her." (/u/TRP_Scepter), or "Why women are first and foremost pragmatic beings" (/u/nickdimitrov). These posts make for long content and a lot of reading, but have little (if any) connection to material from outside the community. They create a kind of self-referential information network that is backed up almost exclusively by the thoughts and feelings of members.

Contrast /r/TheRedPill's insular posting with posts in /r/MensRights, the majority of which are links, contain links, or link and discuss outside content – e.g., "Future is here: The survey [2018] revealed that UK society has a negative View of the word 'masculine', with very few respondents associating masculinity with positive human traits such as care/ kindness (3%), respectfulness (1%), honesty (1%) and supportiveness (1%). - https://futuremen.org/future-men-2018-survey/" (/u/accidental_me); "Education Department Says Schools Must Post Previously Hidden Title IX Training Materials – article link" (/u/TheAndredal); or "Bosses give underperforming female workers kinder but less truthful feedback than men, study reveals OP: Or fear of a 'false allegation'. One has to walk on eggshells when dealing with female employees. – article link" (/u/furchfur). What you get through this comparison is one group whose arguments seem very much grounded in what is happening in popular culture, the media, and social life more broadly (/r/MensRights), and another that seems like a group just talking

amongst themselves. This kind of faux legitimacy based in exposure and the "real world" (wild interpretations of world events and their meanings notwithstanding for the moment) makes the soft misogyny, victimhood signaling, and ability to empathise with the group even more insidious. My research sheds light on /r/MensRights and hopefully brings it into focus as an important and representative group for an important and (sometimes) overlooked larger community with tremendous influence on individuals and public policy.

Reddit

The findings that I have presented in this dissertation, while specific to the two reddit communities I studied, are effective representations of masculinity discourses of broader men's rights and red pill communities (Hodapp, 2017; Ironwood, 2013). They also contribute to the small body of literature that discusses a pipeline toward more radical viewpoints (Munn, 2019)[136] that exists in specific and unique ways on reddit (Mamié et al., 2021; Morini et al., 2021). It shows an ideological connection that allows users to move between groups relatively easily – a move that is facilitated by the way that reddit filters and suggests content. Users see posts from all (or most) of their subscribed subreddits in their main feed, even when the subreddits have wildly different user numbers and engagement, and therefore post and comment scores. In an individual subreddit, the sorting algorithms use the combination of time on site, user votes, user activity, and other black boxed factors to push highly active threads with higher upvote totals to the top (when sorted by "hot" of course). But in a user feed, threads are sorted differently. In my personal reddit feed for example, I regularly see posts from /r/MensRights, a subreddit that is much smaller and less active than /r/askreddit or other subreddits I subscribe to. The posts I see from other subreddits often have less time on site, more comments, higher Karma totals, but they are intermixed with content from my smaller subreddit subscribes. The importance of this note is that it speaks to the tailoring of content to the individual user that reddit does above and beyond filtering by hot, controversial, or other metrics. Because of that individual user tailoring, once users start subscribing to content like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill they see more of it. As users get to see more of this content, they are more likely to buy into the logics presented in that

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[136] Outside of the terrorism studies literature that has a longer history of exploring these phenomena and in which the work on far-right radicalization is based (e.g., Ganor et al., 2007; Hogg et al., 2008).

content, and are more likely to travel down the road, in this case, to male supremacist and hard misogynist rhetorics (Hassan et al., 2018; Ribeiro, Ottoni, et al., 2020).

Reddit's method of filtering content by user subscription, but also through the actions and preferences of other users, promotes certain kinds of content in certain communities. For example, in /r/MensRights, content that revisits and reiterates the long-standing and mainstay points of the men's rights ideology are readily upvoted, and therefore appear consistently at the top of user's feeds (e.g., representations and discussions of feminist irrationality appear over and over again in my /r/MensRights hot posts – "Well, If this woman know most slut shaming and body negativity towards women was FROM women, this might be different. And how the fuck is this not mean? If I said something similar to a woman there would be a huge uproar of feminists telling me to die." (/u/NotSoupGuy – 360 Karma after 8 hours) or "Saw this on a radical feminist page on reddit, and hence I conclude that FEMINISM IS WORSE THAN CANCER" (/u/cooltaman – 155 Karma after 8 hours)). These numbers of upvotes are not big, but they mean that hundreds of people are engaging positively with the content and pushing it through to the feeds of those who are community listeners. Combine this with my previous argument about the inclusion of smaller and less popular subreddit content in user aggregated feeds, and you get a throughput from reddit that could be interpreted as promoting certain content (in this case contentious male supremacist content) more than others. This process is true of all subreddits and reddit feeds unless users change the default sorting mechanism to something other than "hot."

The presentation of content that is more niche (like /r/MensRights) alongside more generally popular content in a feed or on a front page has the result of equating those pieces of content in value. As I scroll through my own feed and I see the same amount of content from /r/MensRights that I see from /r/askreddit, my passive thinking is that these pieces of content are equally popular. They are not, but this disconnect can easily lead users (or researchers) to take that parity at face value. The danger is the legitimization of problematic ideology, such as we see with rising numbers of advocates for men's rights and membership in far-right groups.

Additionally, reddit as a study site has a kind of complexity that researchers must be attentive to. On top of what I have discussed in this section, as well as in the other chapters of this dissertation, the role of moderators and meta-talk are worth mentioning. While neither of these elements featured expressly in my research, both have data and methodological

implications. Moderators, as discussed in chapter 2, play a significant but often hidden role in subreddit cultures and communities. Moderators set the rules of a community, and act as the connection point between reddit and the community of users. In doing so, they also set the ideological tenor of the group by permitting and/or allowing certain content while disallowing other content (Robards, 2018; Squirrell, 2019). These power holder/gatekeeper groups are relatively small (usually less than 10 users), and do this work as volunteers, so the reward for their service is power (Matias, 2016a, 2016b). In contentious communities like /r/MensRights or /r/TheRedPill the moderator role is also to keep the community from being sanctioned by reddit.[137]

One of the ways that moderators of subreddits like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill prevent this sanctioning is to change the rules of the subreddit. Sometimes this is in active response to demands made by the platform (/r/TheRedPill removed the rules "No feminism" in late 2019 to keep from violating part of the revised harassment policy from the site), and other times this is in response to users or the moderator's perceptions of community needs. For example, /r/MensRights has had two recent rule changes. The first is the inclusion of a modified "No personal information" rule that explains users can no longer include personal information about anyone they post about, and images (from twitter or Facebook for example) are required to have names and other identifying information blanked out. This rule is not negotiable, and the moderators explain that it stems from reddit's strict no doxing policy. The second is a new rule (circa 2021): "Researchers must contact the mods." This rule is specifically targeted at those looking to post research questions, or conduct other research, since in the past research conducted in this way has reflected negatively on the group. The rule explains: "In the past, some surveys have either misrepresented us or have been flooded by false responses. So we'd like to be sure that the research is genuine" (/r/MensRights, 2021). This rule was not in place when I began my research, and only came into effect long after I had completed the systematic data collection, but its presence is telling of the challenges associated with being a community associated with a social counter-narrative – especially one that is seen as anti-equity and (sometimes) misogynist. The moderators position themselves as gatekeepers to the community,[138] as they hold all the

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[137] Something that proved too difficult to do when /r/TheRedPill got quarantined in 2018, but was successfully accomplished in keeping the community from getting banned after threat of such in 2019.
[138] How active this gatekeeping can be varies by subreddit. See Lajoie's (2019) note on moderators in their work.

power about what research is allowed to continue in the group and what research is forbidden. Combined with the ability to vet and delete posts, and ban users from the group, their power truly begins to resemble what Matias (2016b) called the oligarchic rules of reddit space.

The gatekeeping of research by the moderators in /r/MensRights is connected to a fear of being (mis)represented, and it is easy enough to pull single comments and speak as if they are representative (e.g., "Damned if you do, damned if you don't. So might as well do it, since EVERYONE will believe you did, MIGHT AS WELL KNOCK EM OUT. (/u/justAcuriousDalek)). But I also think that the gatekeeping of research can be seen as a way to protect deeper analysis of the meta-talk (the hidden meanings in conversations) that is occurring in the community. These are sometimes covert and purposeful obfuscations, but other times they are simply implicit or assumed. It is likely that part of the gatekeeping associated with research in /r/MensRights is couched in the idea that these hidden meanings (conscious or unconscious) damage the community. Additional research is needed in this area.

Methodology

As the only researcher of men's rights or male supremacy in my department, and having jumped into online ethnographic work without much background in its practice, I often felt lost and/or alone in my work. I have excellent research mentors, with extensive methodological skills and experience, and these individuals have been gracious with their time and recommendations. I have also read, a lot, about digital ethnography and the ways and means of conducting this type of research. But with all of that, I still was not ready for the actual act of doing this type of research, and I wrote the third manuscript in this dissertation (chapter 7) to lay out some of the significant methodological elements that would have been helpful for me to think through before I started.

At the risk of a theory-method chapter like this appearing tangential to the research that I conducted on masculinities and the manosphere, I want to tie my own work to the guideposts from that manuscript. Since the development of the theory-method came while my writing was in progress, it makes sense for me to do this labour after the fact, and to think through how the elements of technological complexity, time, and researcher familiarity might have changed my own approach.

Tech

In thinking about technological complexity, I want to focus on one of the many elements that become considerations for digital researchers in this area: how the user accesses reddit. At the outset of my project, I had not given any consideration to the ways that I would access my research sites beyond that using the PC interface would be easiest for my data collection. I had given no consideration at all to the fact that the PC reddit experience is demonstrably different to the mobile experience (see figure 7-3), and that the mobile experience is expressly different using the native reddit app or another of the many third-party apps that access the site. The perception that this choice is mundane and (potentially) inconsequential to the way that we collect research data has several implications, including an acknowledgement of a widespread underappreciation for the ways that the user interface changes the ways that users interact with online platforms. Users engaged on mobile devices tend to have shorter text engagements, both in reading and in writing (Keib et al., 2021; Schrock, 2015). The way that reddit is presented on mobile has less community information out-front for users, and so there is a risk of lost context, or less knowledge about the rules and other sidebar information for those users. The change in hardware interface has tangible effects on users, and therefore must be part of our considerations as we design and engage with digital research. These differences continue into human-hardware interaction, and beyond.

A further consideration here that is connected but also stands apart from the technologies themselves, are considerations about how technologies change social relationships and how techno-socialities impact our research products. Wrapped up in this consideration are discussions of the separation (or lack thereof) of physical and digital world persons – questions of representation and "realness", digital space and "meatspace" become important. When a user says something like: "it's arguing against their own supposed ideals and positions. At least the Nazis had a consistent ethos. The feminazis go around in circles. They still hate the jews though - I mean men." (/u/orbitaldecayed, March 30, 2020), does it mean that they are an anti-feminist Nazi sympathiser in the physical world? What can their texts say about how they may or may not act outside of the quasi-anonymous space of reddit? Does it matter, since the work done on online communities is about discussing community ethos, ideology, and influence? When we reach out into digital communities for research, these considerations are often overlooked.

The benefit of thinking through these modes of engagement as a researcher is the potential for much more nuanced (and potentially trustworthy) data as we are accounting for more of the variation that occurs in our wildly diverse world. A lot of information is conveyed by how users engage (through the length of texts posted, for example). This need not be the focus of the project to be valuable, and can be one of the many considerations that qualitative and ethnographic researchers take into account as they engage with digital data and communities. It may also help to explain difficulties before they start, like learning subreddit rules. Researchers who start out their reddit explorations on mobile may be less inclined, or not knowledgeable enough, to seek out subreddit rules and this could be problematic (for example, the new /r/MensRights rule that requires research approval before doing the research).

Time

Doing research online, especially in a space like reddit where pages are static at a given moment presents the researcher with an opportunity. This opportunity is the chance to freeze our research space and capture a version of it in its entirety at that moment. This is unlike any other way of capturing the ethnographic research environment, since the capture does not frame out elements outside the field of vision, and does not silence some voices in favour of others – it is simply a copy of what we might see. This copy (specific to the researcher, time, and space) has great value because we can explore and analyse content in ways that we could not before; the frozen moment in time does not move and does not change.

The challenge with the frozen moment is the same as its value. It does not move and does not change, and is a static representation of a dynamic environment. Although the content does not change unless we reload the page, the content in active[139] spaces of reddit changes every time we reload the page, regardless of how much time elapses between those reloads. So, when we use data that is reddit frozen in time, we are showing a curated version of the space at a given time and sorted a certain way. Including considerations of time in our research theory-method is about acknowledging that issues of time freezing, moving, and the relationship between time and research outcomes exist. They have influence over the types of data we can collect. The type of data we can collect, in turn, influences the kinds of conclusions that we can draw from that data.

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[139] Here my meaning is non-archived content that is still open for comments, although this could extend to all content on reddit as even archived content can change as user accounts are deleted or banned, posts are deleted, or subreddits are banned and disappear from the site.

The importance of these considerations goes beyond being able to speak about a community at a certain time and place (like any qualitative work, digital research reflects a certain time, place, and population), but speaks to how we might encounter content even as we engage with a community in the long term. Posts on /r/MensRights, for example, often reference news articles or scholarly work that were produced many years in the past (e.g., the post "Blatantly false information, the worst part is the comments seem to think the wage gap is real" (/u/pritchie654321) from March 18, 2020, links to an image and article, the article being from Forbes in 2006), and leverage them as examples in their discourses of anti-feminism. The previous example highlights the wage gap, and others focus primarily on sexual victimization – "There are more of male victims of sexual assault and 80% of the perpetrators are women. Why on earth do we see it as a female issue." (/u/benderXX, March 30, 2020) – citing scholarship from 2017; and "This is proof that we shouldn't treat rape as a gendered issue. We all face the risks, and the system has failed men by allowing the false information to continue" (/u/seanisgeynt, March 30, 2020) containing a list of resources and links from 1988-2017. The ability to post in 2020 about something that occurred in 2006, or 2014, or 1996, brings that information back into the foreground, even if it has been proven demonstrably false. So, while doing research online allows us to freeze and consider time in different ways, it also subjects users and researchers to a linearity that is less stable.

The value in understanding and considering time relative to digital research work is that a well-considered project goes beyond acknowledging that the research takes place at a certain time and place, but pre-emptively considers how time passes on their research site. Are posts or comments likely to come back around into the cultural consciousness as they do on twitter through retweets and personal histories, or are comments and posts more likely to fade into obscurity and the archive as they do on reddit?

Knowing how you will engage
The last element of theory-method that could have helped in my own project was to better consider the implications of how I chose to engage in my digital ethnographic work and as a qualitative researcher. The ethnographic standard of immersive engagement in a cultural milieu through lived experience, participation, and systematic data gathering from interlocutors (through interviews and direct contact) is an excellent way to study culture and cultural contexts that are lived and experienced in physical space. There is a shared experience of being physically

present in the same space at the same time. But in the digital world this is changed in many ways, and the connection of physical presence to experience is modified to work through the morays of digital sociality.

There is, then, the opportunity for a changed ethnographic practice that reflects the diversity of user experiences, and acknowledges the observer as contributor. As discussed throughout this dissertation, those who do not contribute text to social media spaces (the readers, voters, and listeners), are essential to the construction and maintenance of online social groups. Those who post regularly are generally in the minority. If we choose to study only text, and/or interview those who are most active, we are getting a small subset of the group.

Knowing the participation dynamics of digital spaces is only part of these considerations, and we need to consider how these non-textual participants might be contributing to the research data we collect from our communities. Using reddit, there is a large contingent of reddit users on subreddits that rarely (if ever) post, but are active in voting on posts. The voting on reddit has a tangible effect on what content is presented to whom, and whether the content leaves the host subreddit and lands on the /r/all page or other larger aggregating pages. Votes are so significant in the ordering of content on the site that there are site-wide rules about gang voting and brigading[140] subreddits or content where a group of users together and systematically downvotes certain content.

Interrogating and understanding the implications of how you will engage with the sites you choose to study, and how that will change the data you can collect is essential. I chose to do a listening ethnography because I was concerned about what could happen if I was revealed and doxed as a researcher that uses feminist theory, and this means that the data I have collected and the conclusions I can draw from it are about the community and how it is experienced by a listener. Is my ethnography the same as those who conduct interviews with members of similar groups? It is not, but I also do not claim that it is, and the understanding and acknowledgement of these differences as they present in digital spaces is an important consideration in our work.

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[140] Gang voting or brigading is where a group of organized or semi-organized users get together to systematically effect content in a certain way. This can be positive, but is most often associated with downvoting, comment flooding, or otherwise negatively effecting specific content, users, or subreddits (Lenhart et al., 2016).

A few notes for leisure researchers:

An important question in the conclusion of this dissertation is what impact my research can have within leisure studies? What work can my dissertation do that is productive for the advancement of knowledge, but also to help move the field forward? I see three areas where my work can do this labour. The first and second are tied to further developing our conceptualization of what leisure can be, and what leisure research can do. As a men's rights researcher I have sometimes had to justify why my research is leisure, and I have had to explain concepts of leisure as they pertain to my work outside of the leisure research community. This labour of explanation is challenging, but in the end can be valuable to leisure scholars and other fields. The third is the feeling that leisure research is quite late to the digital research party, and we are now playing catch-up to be seen as contributors to digital conversations.

What is leisure research <u>for</u> anyway?

As a field, leisure studies is interdisciplinary, and because of this it can provide a kind of perspective that is often missing from other fields of research. Particularly in our department at Waterloo, the openness and development of qualitative research and researchers promotes the kind of critical perspective and analysis that can move the needle on social consciousness issues. This cultural change does happen, and leisure researchers have had significant social impact through their work (e.g., Sherry Dupuis' work on dementia, or Annaliese Singh and Corey Johnson's work on the Georgia Safe Schools Project). But I rarely see leisure researchers as experts on popular media or other outlets discussing leisure research. The researchers they have speaking as experts are not leisure scholars, but more likely scholars from other fields and have leisure as an element of their research – what are we doing wrong?

As I see it, one of the possible explanations for this issue of lack of representation and recognition lies in the approach to interdisciplinarity. Leisure studies is excellent at bringing together scholars from diverse fields, but does not do as well in reaching out into other fields – at demonstrating the significant and necessary contributions of leisure scholars in multi-disciplinary teams. In my research, leisure is the vehicle for the community discourses that I examine, so while being an important element of how the communities come together, notions of serious leisure, social capital, or community theory that are significant in leisure studies are background rather than the focus. They are, however, important explainers about why these communities come together in the way that they do, and develop in certain ways over time. The leisure time

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activity that manosphere adherents devote to their respective ideologies are significant commitments of time and personal resources. Leisure theory helps us to understand why they might do these things beyond singular psychological or sociological theories, and provides a way to understand them that synthesises these ideas, rooted in community. The power of this synthesis is often lost outside of our field, and so researchers like me, who step into other fields (like studies on male supremacy) need to bring leisure perspectives with us as a pillar of our research, not an interesting sidebar. I believe that collectively, as leisure scholars we need to do a better job of working for recognition of the field and its contributions to broader social theory, and we can do that by encouraging students, like me, who actively work outside of leisure's bubble. My work does this, and I have often received feedback at non leisure conferences that this perspective has value and brings something different to the analysis. I believe that we could work more actively to stop having to answer the question "what is leisure studies?" and do a bit less talking to ourselves (Samdahl & Kelly, 1999).

What can leisure research do?
Beyond describing and theorizing leisure practice, leisure research has a long history of critical work, examining taken for granted spaces and activities and interrogating them relative to gender (K. A. Henderson, 1990; C. W. Johnson, 2008; Parry, 2014; Shaw, 1985), race (Floyd & Stodolska, 2019; Outley & McKenzie, 2007; Pinckney IV et al., 2018; Quash, 2018), sexuality (Flanagan, 2019; Oakleaf & Richmond, 2017), and other markers of intersectional experience. With respect to how we define leisure, I have often cited Mowatt (2012) and Williams (2017) as pushing the envelope about what we consider leisure to include elements like crime, and even witnessing murder. In these cases (and many others, like Berdychevsky's work on sex (2016, 2018)), leisure researchers have done the expository work of demonstrating how taken for granted activities and pastimes have significant and deleterious effects on certain people.

Critical theories and perspectives inform the interrogation of contentious communities like those I study, as they show how oppression in leisure spaces can be both singular and systemic. The individual can be anti-equity, but so too can the community, affecting everyone that interacts with that community as a participant and/or a bystander. The communities I study in this project work on behalf of men and male domination, and often have undercurrents of other supremacist ideologies (Clapp, 2021; Ebin, 2021). While it is easy to pick out individual users who advocate for male supremacy (e.g., *Masculinity is winning, and winning is power*,

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/u/LastRevision, March 21, 2020), the prevailing discourses in both communities speak to the superiority of men and attributes they associate with men. **They exist on a spectrum of male supremacist belief** – and that is a problem.

Both reddit groups subtly and overtly advocate for the (re)establishment of post World War II Western gender traditionalisms of dependent and subservient women. They agitate against feminism with less-than-adequate understandings of the nuance and complexities of feminist theory and thinking. They claim to be subordinated, but from positions of technological, political, and economic power. They do this as a hobby, or a passion project, or as a "'serious distraction' [or] the careerist notion of serious leisure espoused by Stebbins" (Rojek, 1999, p. 82). Regardless of how you want to conceptualize the 'why,' the actions of these users are leisure practices acting against the interests of others, and in some cases promote and carry out real violence in the world.

In my case I believe that leisure research can continue the path of critical, expository research that demonstrates the ways that leisure activities perpetuate and promote attitudes and rhetorics of oppression. Using leisure as a lens can allow us to see the actions and statements by users in spaces like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill in a different light, and gives them more complexity than simply the discourses of misogynists. But making the field of leisure studies a stronger force in critical research on social action requires the labour of further breaking apart the assumption that leisure is net social positive, and embracing leisure practices that we have called deviant, taboo, purple, or other mild pejoratives as equal (in leisure) to other pursuits we love to celebrate.

My own understanding of leisure is imbricated with the idea of leisure as freedom or *eudaimonia.*[141] This continues to be some of the foundational theory about leisure we are taught as students, but I think it clouds our thinking by obfuscating the ways that leisure harms, oppresses, or can encourage hate. The deep intersectional difficulties with free time and *eudaimonic* interpretations of leisure aside for the moment, the concept of leisure as right and good persists in the deep recesses of our understanding, and comes out in our scholarship. The anti-equity leisure practices of the members of these communities complicate that idea.

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[141] For non-leisure scholars, eudaimonia is the Greek word that translates to the state or condition of 'good spirit', but that is also commonly translated to welfare or happiness.

By moving towards models of acceptance we can be more relevant, and perhaps even better respond to accusations of a field and an academy that is sexist, racist, and queer/transphobic. What my work does is to help nuance the conversations about participation in manosphere groups, but also the conversation about what leisure is and what it can do in the world. These are important conversations that we need to continue, and my research does its part to move this agenda forward.

Unfashionably late to the digital party

At the risk of sounding glib, leisure research can sometimes feel ludic in its approach to digitality. This is changing, but broadly North American leisure studies has been slow to pick up and work with ideas of the digital and digitality in our research. When I began this project, except for a few authors (e.g, Sintas et al., 2015), research on leisure and digitality was predominantly generated from scholars in the UK like Bryce and Rutter (2003) Spracklen (2015), Silk et al. (2016), and Redhead (2016). Scholarship in (and on) digital leisure spaces in North American contexts has developed in earnest since then, but we still have a long way to go. Interrogation of digitality and leisure remains mostly the context of special issues (Schultz & McKeown, 2018), special projects, and books (Parry, Johnson, & Fullagar, 2018).

My fear is that leisure scholarship is in danger of being left behind in a fast paced and ever-changing world – both in research and technologies. As a field, I believe we should have been among the most prepared to step forward and embrace digitality as leisure practice, and therefore make space for leisure studies scholars as leaders in digitally mediated research well into the future. Leisure theory is, by necessity, the kind of malleable and multi-disciplinary set of understandings well-adapted to take on new ways of being and contextualizing them as leisure. We have published papers on wild boar hunting from helicopters (von Essen, 2020), social drinking (Burns & Gallant, 2020), gonzo ethnography (Harmon & Dunlap, 2020), as well as urban cycling (Mayers & Glover, 2020), and these are all from a single issue of *Leisure Sciences*. The integration of digitality, not as a point of division or alienation of presence (Harmon & Duffy, 2021), but as an integral part of social interaction and personal ways of being in a society with ubiquitous computing seems like it would have been a reasonable path forward. Why has our turn to digitality been so slow, considering the great breadth and sophistication that we have in our scholarship?

Leisure studies is small, and our faculty are generally from a wide variety of disciplines. This baked-in interdisciplinarity should have had us drawing on, and creating, cutting edge research at the intersections of, for example, digitality, leisure, and labour. It is striking that the field has been slow to embrace the fact that digitality is part of (nearly) every leisure practice we have. The indications that computing and digital devices were to become ubiquitous in our lives were there long before we all had the internet in our pockets; scholarship on video games, gender, and free time use began to appear in the 1980s (e.g., Creasey & Myers, 1986; Kaplan, 1983). The leisure implications of the transition toward computer ubiquity and the changing nature of leisure, recreation, tourism, and sport were evident even then. Instead of being on the cutting edge we are scrambling, it seems, to catch up to others who have been doing the work of interrogating digital leisure cultures on our behalf (M. R. Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; T. L. Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Yang et al., 2008). Where is our research situated in relation to fields like game studies? Why do leisure studies scholars not hold leading roles in games institutes or labs on digital play? Where are the recreation and leisure scholars at the forefront of designing and implementing digital tools for parks, protected areas, community recreation programming, or therapeutic recreation interventions? As with my previous questions about leisure, is this because we are still only talking to ourselves (Samdahl & Kelly, 1999)?

The difficulty with playing catch-up is that we are under-prepared methodologically for working effectively in digital spaces that already demand a command of digitality and digital methods. There is solid academic work on digital environments that is decades old (Donath, 1999; Nardi, 1996; Turkle, 1984, 1995). The digital landscape, as I illustrate in chapter seven has complexity all its own and it requires us to be willing to work differently. It requires different considerations in research design and implementation; considerations like the impacts of complex hardware and software technologies on research, modes of researcher engagement with digital spaces, and altered considerations of time. Research connected to digitality is different, and we cannot simply translate our existing research approaches and paradigms to digital venues. Doing so, in addition to willfully ignoring changing world and social landscapes, will leave us with half-baked research and conclusions with limited utility. It is not enough to say that you collected data online. There are important questions to answer about why? where? how? and the implications of those decisions on the data, its analysis and representation. These things matter. We do not need to start from scratch or (re)invent digital research, as there are existing

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approaches that we can use like digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016), algorithmic studies (Ford, 2014; Kotliar, 2020; Noble, 2018b), big data studies (Gezgin, 2020), digital queer methodologies (Dadas, 2016), or even more traditional qualitative methods, provided they are guided by a conceptual framework that forces the researcher to consider the intricacies that are unique and significant in digital settings.

This is a space where I can contribute. The development of digital methods and theory that apply to leisure research, but that are robustly grounded in previous development of digital research are essential to helping to reduce the feeling of lag that leisure studies is (sometimes) subject to. My work is leisure studies, but with mentorship and expertise from media studies and digital methodologies that put me in a good position to help in more robust digital research developments in leisure. My work is both an example and a set of guideposts for leisure researchers moving into digital work.

What this work does not do

Even with the expansive length of this dissertation, there are some limitations. There are elements that remain under-explored through the three manuscripts that are included in this document – items that deserve more time than they get here. The following section describes elements of the study that remain open for discussion precisely because of the limitations of format and time. Ideas for future inquiry that arise from my work come after.

Race and White supremacy

Elements of race and supremacy discourses (especially white supremacy) take a smaller role than they could in this work. When discussing what it means to be a man in /r/TheRedPill, or what it means to be oppressed because you are a man in /r/MensRights, discourses of race feel conspicuously absent to me. Although race comes to light when stories are shared from abroad, particularly from India and Pakistan in /r/MensRights, discussion is about the oppression of men in these places and the privilege of women rather than the influences of race, or class, or location on the outcomes that men are experiencing. Because I was thinking about and coding for masculinity, and because of the lack of overt discussion about race, my presumption becomes that what links the communities together (being men) is more important than racialized experience, and so they do not talk about it. But this presumption reveals my own priorities and

blind spots, and I need to acknowledge that I do not have the tools to see what might be lurking in the meta-talk and deeper recesses of the supremacist ideologies that fuel these groups.

Discussion of race are part of the meta-theoretical considerations that should be applied to my data. Although issues of race, and especially Whiteness and its ties to supremacy and presumptive whiteness in dialogues of male idealism, are there, they are not the focus of the work I presented in my manuscripts. This is part of the limitation of format and methodological decisions, where some content must necessarily be left out, but also my own focus and priorities. Further work on the implications of race, and especially presumptive Whiteness could be the focus of future work using this data.

Methodological considerations

The methodological choices that I made for this project present some limitations to my work, and there are some legitimate methodological possibilities I would like to address here. The first is that, given the non-traditional ethnographic approach of the research, some hallmarks of Ethnography are missing. Although I discussed these issues at length in the Methodology chapter, some of these elements could have contributed in different and potentially generative ways to my research, including member checking and interviews to compare my analysis with other user experience, and discussions around requesting access to these communities. Along with bringing the research more in line with other ethnographic work in similar online spaces, interviews and member checking could have brought an interesting additional data set to the analysis of the discourses of masculinities within both communities. While I believe that those most likely to be willing to participate in interviews like this are active posters in communities, the research does not ask this question, and might have yielded interesting results had I made different methodological decisions, and remains a future possibility.

I also believe that requesting access to do research in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill could have generated interesting data that was not part of this project. My assumption is that given the feminist and gender-focused nature of my previous research, I would not likely have been granted access to either community. However, the process of requesting and potentially negotiating with the gatekeepers of these groups may have made an interesting addition to the research process and data. The risk here, of course, is that the project could collapse, perhaps not in the withdrawal of participant data as in Gajjala's (2002) case, but instead as a project that

could never begin. Nonetheless, this process could have been interesting and generative in thinking through how access, gatekeeping, and protectionism might have impacts on research and research data from these communities. It is also important to note that if I were planning to conduct this research now, I would have to request access from /r/MensRights given the new rule in that community about research – an additional note on research timing.

My decisions around interviews/member checking, as well as requesting access to the community/informed consent are indicative of the timeline of this research project, as well as my own research toolkit as I was planning and implementing the project. I believe that if I were to begin this research again with the knowledge I have today, I might make different methodological decisions, but I stand by what I have presented in this dissertation.

I also think there are other avenues that I could have used, or could use in the future to enhance the work already completed, including voting, posting, and community question asking. Given the importance of voting on reddit, and the likelihood that there are large numbers of users who vote regularly but rarely (if ever) post, voting could be an interesting addition to the type of listening ethnographic work that I did for this project. The inclusion of voting, and making sure that the researcher kept good records about the posts they voted on, how they voted, and the movement of posts within the subreddit (meaning what happened to the post popularity and sorting in the feed over time), might have had some interesting effects on what posts are presented to the researcher and in what order. The need for some sort of voting protocol notwithstanding, this could be a way to feel even more engaged with the content as a researcher. Connected to voting, and subject to the same need for protocols of some kind, is posting, and the researcher's ability to contribute posts or comments to the community. Although possible, I continue to believe that the kind of agitational posting I originally considered for this project (see [The Silent Witness – Lurking as Listening](#) section) is potentially dangerous and unethical, but there is an avenue to make posts that are not adversarial and could generate a great deal of interesting data. This would require more development before it could be implemented effectively. A last possibility, but one that would likely need to happen in concert with requesting access (although not necessarily), would be to post open questions in the communities either as posts or in comments. Not directed to a single individual, and not meant as agitational, these open questions could seek clarification, request community thoughts and opinions on specific topics, or introduce ideas for discussion. Although questions like this (in posts or

comments) would require careful curation for ethical and trustworthiness reasons, they could prove a very interesting addition to ethnographic work in unloved communities.

Last, a methodological move that could be generative would be to, as I discussed in the methodology chapter, move outside of reddit, and incorporate additional study sites. These would include sites that link into the communities, including YouTube and the communities of men's rights and red pill content creators on that platform, outside blogs dedicated to men's rights and the red pill, and the websites that support these communities like *A Voice for Men*. Extending the ethnographic project to be multi-sited allows for different kinds of conclusions and discussions about discourse to be engaged, and has the potential to greatly expand the research.

Future inquiry – Where could we go from here?

One of the significant lessons learned through this project is that the act of writing up research is as much about deciding what to cover later as it is about what to write about today. Ethnographic inquiry, and choosing findings of value from the tremendous amount of data collected, is a messy and complicated undertaking (Postill & Pink, 2012), and I suspect that like most early academics my dissertation has left more questions than answers. Among those many questions, I have chosen several to discuss briefly below and suggest them for further inquiry.

The lack of Canadian context on masculinities, the right, and men's rights

Literature on misogynist and right-wing activism and action is growing steadily as academics, funders, and politicians begin to understand the impact that these growing sub-communities can have on social and political discourse. In 2021, the government of Canada declared the Proud Boys and other neo-Nazi groups terrorist organizations, subjecting them to additional penalties for actions in-country (Tasker, 2021), and although this has some impact on a small number of individuals in Canada, the truth is that organizations like this have limited impact in Canada overall (the Proud Boys is staunchly American in rhetoric and alignment). More pressing, and important, is the investigation of groups that develop in the Canadian context, or that have and maintain stronger holds in the Canadian population. One example of international groups getting a foothold in Canada would be the rapid rise of the Soldiers of Odin in the country, where chapters spread quickly through many provinces. While they had an equally rapid demise

(Archambault & Veilleux-Lepage, 2019), the Soldiers of Odin were able to maintain an influential presence in some areas and municipalities.

More pressing than international affiliations would be the home-grown right-wing. Ontario Tech's Centre on Hate, Bias, and Extremism, working with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, have published reports (Davey et al., 2020; Perry & Scrivens, 2015) detailing the landscape for the proliferation of right-wing extremism in Canada, but relatively few scholars are investigating these issues from the Canadian context. After some interest in the radical right in the 1990s in Canada (Harrison, 1995; Ross, 1992), there was little discussion until in the mid-2010s, around the time of the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the surge of right-wing populism there and elsewhere. Since 2016, several authors and research groups have taken up right-wing violence in Canada (Erl, 2021; Hofmann et al., 2021; Hutchinson et al., 2021; Scrivens, 2020; Scrivens & Perry, 2017). Usually centered around violent attacks like the attempted 'arrest' of the Prime Minister in 2020 by a Canadian reservist (Boutilier, 2020; Rabson & Press, 2020), the research of these authors is important, but focuses heavily on violence, attack, and direct threat, and less on the types of soft misogyny, insidious infiltration, and undermining of social justice that is at the heart of much of the men's rights movement. Research foci and funding are centered on policing the potential for violence, and fail to recognize or take proactive approaches that would address the entrées into radicalization – the starting points of the pipelines. Work in this area, exploring the Canadian landscape of men's rights actions, as well as its influence on political and social policy is still lacking and in need of investigation.

Interrogating empathy and what these men seek in their leisure communities
In her article *Seven theses on critical empathy: a methodological framework for 'unsavory' populations*, Alexis de Coning (2021) discusses the use of critical empathy when working with populations that are hostile or antagonistic. Empathy in this work, while useful de Coning says, must be employed critically because without that criticality we are in danger of "intellectually lazy conclusions about [our subjects] expressions of suffering and the circumstances in which this suffering arises" (p. 8). What feels like empathy has come up for me several times working through my dissertation research, as I have considered the positionality of the users on the other end of my data, and the needs that they are overtly and covertly expressing through their posts and comments. These feelings of empathy are confined (for the most part) to the users in /r/MensRights, as over the course of this project I have begun to tire of the repetitive and

domineering commentary from /r/TheRedPill. Many of the men who come to /r/MensRights are looking for support; for someone to listen to them and feel empathy for the various emotions they are feeling as men in a changing world where they feel unprepared.

It is easy for me, with my own positionality, to feel empathy for them (sometimes). Many of them feel lost and without anyone to talk through the challenges they are facing. I have felt this way, and demographically I fall quite close to the presumptive mainstays of men's rights groups – white, middle class, educated, some money (Hodapp, 2017). Critically, I have not become a men's rights advocate or adherent to the Red Pill, and so over and over in my research I have found myself asking the question of why them and not me? It is perhaps that I have support structures (family, friend, and professional) that allow me to work through issues that might push me in the direction of men's radicalization. It is perhaps my extensive education in women's studies and feminist theory (although adherents to these men's rights ideologies would call this 'indoctrination'). Maybe something 'bad enough' has not happened to me yet, something that would push me into the orbit of the manosphere.

Regardless, I believe that empathy in situations of researching and illuminating "unloved groups" (Fielding, 1990) is essential, even as we remain critical of those empathetic feelings. If the goal of researching these groups is to prevent new recruits from moving into their orbits, or to bring people safely out of these ideologically problematic spaces (Tait, 2017), then we must be able to feel something for them besides contempt. I think that inquiry at the intersections of these leisure communities and the soft misogyny (Manne, 2017) of men's rights discourses would yield important insights into how we might bridge the gap between equity and men's rights discourses. That might help us devise ways to prevent disaffected men from moving (deeper) into the manosphere. I also think that it is possible to generate and work with empathy without interviewing these users, especially if you would "fit right in" at an in-person meet up.[142] I will cover this in more detail below, but I believe I am ideally positioned to continue research on these groups while leveraging the kind of critical empathy de Coning (2021) explains.

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[142] Someone who shall remain nameless said this to me once. They were speaking in jest, but the idea has stuck with me as I have done this research and thought about the (potentially) small distance between myself and these adherents to men's rights and red pill ideologies.

Mapping masculinities in the manosphere

There is a growing corpus of recent research on the manosphere, especially as that loose amalgamation of groups proliferates online (Copland, 2021; Krendel, 2020; Lindsay, 2020; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Ribeiro, Blackburn, et al., 2020). But relatively few of these researchers are focused expressly on the development and expressions of masculinity within the individual groups. While notions of masculinity and 'man' behaviour are present in nearly all research on the manosphere (it would be a grave oversight if it were not), only authors like Ging (2019b), Carian (2019) and Clapp (2021) focus directly on masculinities and their influences/co-developments with manosphere spaces.

The research in this dissertation shows a contrast in the way that discourses of masculinities are expressed between /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill communities on reddit. This disparity, I believe, is indicative of other wide differences in the ways that masculinities are expressed, policed, and rewarded between groups that make up the manosphere. A line of research worth pursuing would be to map how masculinities discourses differ across the variety of manosphere ideologies, both to better define groups, but also to demonstrate the deep divides between the ideological sub-divisions in this loose confederacy. Aside from a shared anti-feminism (Marwick & Caplan, 2018), the single unifying element of manosphere groups is their identification as, and with, men and masculinity – even if that masculinity is violent or untenable in equitable society. If we can identify tangible and irreconcilable differences in this most fundamental area of unification, perhaps the manosphere could be fractured irrevocably, softening its influence and potential for harm.

So, you're doing research on the internet huh?

Last, there remains a critical paucity of discussion about research in digital spaces from fields that are only now, in the age of COVID-19, engaging in a real way with the implications of digitality. Not to relitigate my argument from earlier in this chapter, but here I would like to suggest that we need to continue down the path of methodological interrogation and practical application, to build better research strategies in fields like leisure studies that are really just beginning to move ahead with widespread digital research. Authors like Arora (2011, 2014), and Spracklen (2015) made calls for digital considerations in leisure theory, but their calls lacked tangible ways that researchers could pick up and put to work research with digitality and leisure, leaving it in the realm of theory. In 2018 when Harrison Oakes, Corey Johnson, and I (Cousineau

et al., 2019) sketched out a way to conceptualize and engage with research on (and with) mobile applications, especially GSNAs, we proposed some more tangible ways that researchers could understand the specific needs of digital research on leisure. The continuation and expansion of the theorization on appnography (C. W. Johnson et al., 2021), along with the theory-method presented in chapter seven, provides expanded guideposts for digital leisure research, but it is not enough. We require more academic work that explores the intersections of digitality and social research and the tangibility of research practice, but that is also accessible to those without the time to delve deeply into the applied literature on digital ethnographic methods or digital sociology. Are digital research methods and their particularities covered in the methodology texts that we assign to upper year undergraduates and in graduate programs? Especially post-COVID-19, it is inexcusable (or downright irresponsible) if they are not. There must be a collective push to continue to refine digital research approaches, and give those researchers exploring digital research for the first time help in wayfinding in the same way as we do with basic quantitative and qualitative research in our current research methods courses.

Reddit affordances

Returning briefly to points that I discussed in the methodological considerations section above, there are things about reddit that could certainly benefit from more exploration and explication by academics. The voting system, for example, has such a profound impact on reddit user experience, that in addition to exploring how voting behaviour changes what is presented to users, the act of voting itself is significant. On a platform where the votes (especially the early votes) really matter in who sees content, there is power involved in voting on this platform beyond the simple 'like.' An interesting study in this area would be to interview reddit users who work actively to be early voters on posts, especially posts in large subreddits like /r/funny or /r/pics. What do these users feel they get out of this behaviour? And, since they are voting on someone else's content (except in cases of multiple account boosting like the story of /u/unidan I discussed earlier) what is the tangible reward for doing so?

I also believe that there is further work that could be done on exploring affordances that I discussed in chapter six: (1) the de-coupling of shared experience from geography; (2) it has an available spectrum of participation; (3) a free and open platform made up of communities of shared interest; and (4) it feels cogent. Beyond the reasons covered by reddit authors like Massanari (2015), exploring the specifics of these ideas, especially with those who are members

of contentious groups on the site, would be an interesting way to explore user motivation. These ways that reddit creates and maintains space for users (both in contentious communities and otherwise) remain interesting areas for inquiry.

More exploration of temporary data and snapshots

Last, there is a need for more work about the implications of freezing static spaces, like a loaded reddit page, and what it means to have and keep these images as representations of a dynamic community. My research here does not explore what happens to the threads as they go forward, and although I collected data over a long period of time, each of my threads are captured at a specific moment. I did not track what happened to them over time – if more content was added, how votes moved up or down, how long the post was active before it was archived, etc. I believe that the implications of this mode of collecting data have not been fully explored in how it influences the researcher and their interpretation of data – what it means to take these snapshots, and what it says (and does not say) about the communities and users. I think more comparative work, work that uses multiple methods of data collection then contrasts them, could be valuable in helping to understand this complicated part of digital research.

Challenges and Worries

Completing a Ph.D. is hard, and I could likely fill a chapter discussing the technological, emotional, and physical challenges I faced while completing this research. Rather than do that long reflexive work in this concluding chapter (this will come after some decompression), I will touch on two important challenges I face, or rather worries that I have, as this important phase of my research ends.

Feeling empathy and falling victim to it

As I alluded to in the introductory chapters of this dissertation, as well as previously in this concluding chapter, I am continually challenged and concerned by my own positionality as I research men's rights groups. Having been told more than once that based on my appearance, physical presentation, and affect, I could "fit right in" if these groups were meeting in person, I have been diligent as I worked through my research to have regular check-ins with myself about my feelings regarding men's rights' points of contention. While it might not be immediately clear why my physical presentation links with my feelings about men's rights issues, the idea

that I might be seen as a welcome addition to their ranks is one that has never escaped me. It causes me to ask what makes me so different from 'them?' Could I be recruited?

Statements about "fitting right in" were made in jest (I think anyway), but the concept has stuck with me, and the idea that I could fall into identifying with my study groups in some way has caused me to keep a close group of colleagues and friends willing to hear my thoughts and challenge my thinking throughout my study. With these measures to keep my engagements in check, I have kept grounded as I finished my dissertation, but I sometimes wonder, as I move away from the shelter of Ph.D. study, will those safeguards hold up going forward? Will it be possible to build the same kind of support structures as I move on? Without them, and the formality of support structures for students (including an attentive supervisor and other faculty), does a significant enough life-changing event (for example, if my marriage were to dissolve and the subsequent custody struggles that might come along with that), have the potential to push me into the waiting arms of the very groups I critique so heavily here? Am I a significant life event away from adopting these worldviews? I do not think so, but I have seen members of the men's rights community show tremendous support for other users in crisis, and is empathy not what each of us is looking for in challenging times?

Knowing that there is significant empathy within these groups, and being aware that many of these men (especially in /r/MensRights) are looking for that empathetic community, is one of the downfalls of the need for empathy I discussed above. With the willingness to feel empathy, even critical empathy, comes the ability to be taken in by the rhetoric. Corey Johnson would likely say that this falls into the category of writing oneself at risk (2009), and the need to interrogate the "researcher self" continually as we engage with research. Acknowledging the challenge of needing to have some empathy, with the dangers of having that empathy, is an important step to mitigating this issue.[143] Empathy, then, remains a tricky landscape in any research, but especially so when those you critique, but also feel for, look 'just like you.'

Leaving too much unsaid

One of my great worries about having written an integrated dissertation is that too many things have been left unsaid. In preparing to write this concluding chapter I reviewed other manuscript

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[143] That is, of course, if we see the struggle of the researcher as an issue to be "solved" rather than itself interrogated as part of the research process – especially with ethnography.

dissertations from friends and mentors and was heartened to read that they also felt as though, to borrow a metaphor from Rudy Dunlap, they had 'left things on the table.' In the struggles I worked through to complete the final manuscript included here (chapter 7), I lamented to my supervisor that I could have simply written other, more traditional manuscripts in its place and been done with it. But that, I think, would have missed the point of doing this type of dissertation. Had I written what was simple and direct, the writing of the integrated dissertation would have been about completion and speed – choosing three things and writing them up so that I could be finished – rather than building a coherent and contributory product that could exist as scholarship and a flexible research document. My work would have become about the letters after my name and not the research findings or the change they could make. That said, the three manuscripts included here still leave things out that might one day make their way into a monograph.[144]

My worries about an integrated dissertation are couched in the same kinds of traditionalism that I critique about men's rights communities. Although considerations about monograph versus manuscript are not necessarily about male supremacy, the degrees of separation between Western gender traditionalisms and academic traditionalisms are low in number and easy to identify. As a critical scholar whose research serves to illuminate the ways that traditionalisms can negatively affect our lives, I should probably worry less about my decision to complete my dissertation in this way, and more about whether making this decision accomplishes something. Because of the concomitant publication of these works, I am contributing to the surging body of knowledge on men's rights and right-wing groups online as it happens – I don't feel late to the party. No matter which format I chose, things would be left out. A research project that spans multiple years can never be adequately captured in a single document of any kind and so the dissertation, no matter the format, is a beginning and an act of becoming (Guttorm, 2016). I believe this work accomplishes something and has value – but, of course, it does not stop me from worrying.

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[144] Having chosen not to write a monograph at this time, I have no actual way of knowing if anything was truly left out of this document that would have been included there, but my suspicion is that a monograph dissertation written by me would have been unnecessarily long and Corey agrees.

Final Thoughts

During my tenure as a Ph.D. student and candidate, a lot has changed. Three things have helped reassure me that the work I do has value and needs to continue: the literature is growing, and more researchers are discussing misogyny, men's groups, and online platforms; the manosphere has spurred violence; and I became a parent.

Feeling like the only person talking about an issue, you get the sense that you are screaming into the void. In the context of leisure studies I have often felt as if I am the only person in the field doing research in this area, but that is not entirely true. The researchers who have been pushing the boundaries of leisure as a subject are my compatriots, even if we study different things. I am also greatly encouraged by the growing numbers of researchers exploring these spaces, and the formation of research groups and institutes (e.g., the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism (IRMS)) that provide mutual support in that research; they remind me that I am not alone. The work on manosphere groups is from diverse fields, and contributing a leisure voice to research and conference discussions has been a productive way to feel a part of that thematic academic community. The research coming out of groups like the IRMS, and the Centre for Hate, Bias, and Extremism, indicates that my research is well timed and well positioned to make up part of the manosphere academic cannon. It also makes me feel that this research is worthwhile.

Much of the research from the groups mentioned above connects the manosphere, violence, and the rise of North American proto fascism through major world events like the American insurrection in January 2021. The rise of proto fascism has emboldened other right-wing actors, like men's rights groups, who do not necessarily tie themselves to more authoritarian ideologies, but would certainly welcome the curtailment of equity work on behalf of anyone who is not a cis-het-White man (Carian & Johnson, 2020; DiBranco, 2020; Ebin, 2021; Preston et al., 2021). The increasing mainstreaming of right-wing and far-right rhetoric reminds me every day that illuminating and discussing men's groups is important if we are interested in a just and equitable society, and that to research and share this information is essential. Longer term, persistent and public denunciation of anti-equity, far-right views can have significant and positive long-term consequences. Data from Pew research shows that acceptance of same-sex marriage in Canada and the United States is at an all-time high (Poushter & Kent,

2020), and Edward Keenan (2021) has recently written that the high acceptance rate in Canada could signal that some culture wars do indeed have endings. If we accept this to be the case, then consistent pressure highlighting the unacceptability of anti-equity worldviews can have positive consequences long-term for individuals and society.

Last, I want to reflect on the most important thing that has happened during my Ph.D., and it had nothing to do (at least on the surface) with research. Part way through this journey my partner birthed our child.[145] As a young human with a penis, he is gendered a boy, and treated accordingly at almost all times.[146] While my dissertation is not on the gendering of children, considering his potential existence as a boy and man, causes me to think about ideas of masculinity, social setting, privilege, and positionality every day as he learns to exist in our world. It is impossible to know how exactly he will grow up, or who he will grow up to be, but like me he will need to navigate positionality and privilege as a White man in Canada. Even with parents who are conscious of, and actively engaged with, movements for social equity, it is always possible that he will see these as challenges to a presumed entitlement, or that in acts of young person rebellion he explores more radical ideology on the right. These possibilities, hypotheticals where he becomes one of the men I critique in my academic work, provide the motivation I need to continue my research and critical analysis of men's rights, male supremacism, and anti-equity. He will at least have access to robust analysis and critical evaluation of their arguments, and role models for equity in myself and my partner. If he becomes a champion for equity in the world, that will be all the validation I need for my scholarly efforts.

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[145] I choose not to name them here for a variety of reasons, none more significant than the fact that not everyone will agree with my interpretations and findings in this work, and they need not be personally implicated in my work.
[146] With the exception of when they choose to have a 'pony' or pigtails in their wild, uncut COVID hair.

9 : Afterword – Knowing when to quit

Figure 9-2: Too much internet - meme - from memegenerator.net.

As I was completing the final chapter of this dissertation, a couple of interesting things happened. The first is that reddit sent me a 9[147] cake day message, reminding me that I have been a member under my personal username for nine years (figure 9-2). These nine years come after three or four under another username, so I know I have been on reddit for well over a decade, but getting the reminder made my reddit persona (and me) feel old. That feeling of age was very strange since, outside of time spent with colleagues from the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism (IRMS), the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), and a few others, I spend a lot of time telling people about reddit as if it were a new thing that nobody knows about. Spending that time eats into papers and presentations and sometimes I get a little annoyed. When you have spent so long participating in something, it is easy to assume that others should be familiar with it, but that is just not the case. Inadvertently, it exposed how my work on reddit has evolved into presumption and expectations of others.

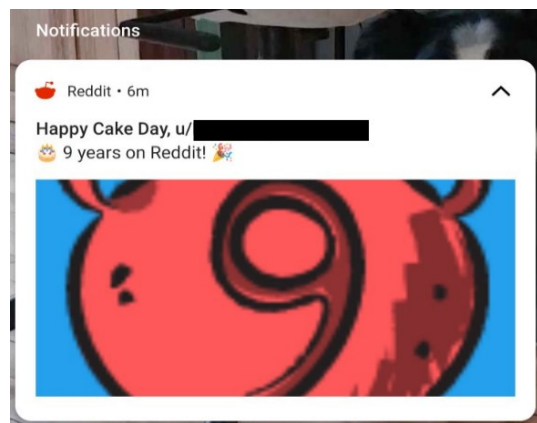

Figure 9-1: Screen shot of Cake Day message from reddit to the author - mobile screenshot, cropped.

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[147] Cake day is how reddit refers to the anniversary of the day a user created their account, like a birthday, but without the biology.

The other thing this cake day message did, was make me reflect on the important place reddit has in my life as a leisure activity, but also as a source of news and information. I take everything I read on reddit with a healthy dose of salt, since like other social media spaces the content I consume is posted by other users, but I have found over my many years on the site that I often get news sooner than I would otherwise. When I am feeling a bit adventurous, I can pretty easily read news about the same issue from wildly different perspectives as well. There is real value for me in the individualized experience you can build through reddit, even with all the trappings that come along with its programming, algorithms, and troubling content. It is kind of a trap.

The second interesting thing has been a reflection on my continued involvement with /r/MensRights. Just like before I started this project, /r/MensRights appears in my personal reddit feed. A couple of times a day, I scroll past a post from /r/MensRights and give the title a quick scan. Usually they are mundane, and I scroll past them with nothing more than a dismissive second glance, but occasionally the title makes me pause and/or give them a click. I am still not interested in engaging with these posts through comments, or even voting, but what the community is saying continues to interest me. I know better. I know where the conversations are going, and I know what the users will say, but sometimes I click anyway.

On June 22, 2021 /u/Alaming_Draw made a text post with a long title that ended with "SO sick of screaming harpy idiotic feminists unable to cope with facts/evidence." Thinking, 'this sounds like a fun one,' I clicked on the post and found myself reading the words of a man clearly more concerned with winning an argument and the "power of logic" than the content of the argument itself. The post, although not highly commented on (11 comments) and with less than 100 upvotes, takes place at the complex intersections of sexual assault allegations, men's rights, the rights of persons with disabilities, narratives around false accusations, and man rage about being excluded from a conversation they clearly intended to "win" with "facts/evidence." Nothing about the post, or the interactions that took place in the comments, was even vaguely surprising, but it made me ask myself why I bother? Why do I continue to have these posts in my personal feed? Why give them any energy at all after all the labour that came through this dissertation?

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Corey Johnson once told me, in a discussion about ethnography, that eventually you just sort of get over it. So much time and energy spent in a space and place, then time spent thinking about that space and place, leaves you drained of the need or desire to go back there – 'You can't spend your whole life in a country and western gay bar' he said, or something like that. So why do I keep doing it? The best I can come up with is that it reminds me of two things: (1) that these places still exist and there are a certain number of people that still feel this way, so I should probably keep working; and (2) that they are a small corner of reddit (and the internet), surrounded by better, more entertaining things like pictures of dogs and gender reveal parties gone wrong. The most popular post **ever** on /r/MensRights is titled '*How to get banned from r/Feminism*' and is a screen capture of an exchange that attempts to litigate, with feminists, feeling safe versus being safe. The poster (a known participant in /r/MensRights) gets banned rather quickly, and the incident is used as an exemplar and rallying cry for men's rights advocates because it contrasts 'feelings' with 'reality' and casts feelings as personal and inconsequential. It has over 30,500 upvotes and over 2,000 comments as of June 25, 2021.[148] There are good reasons to be concerned about this post and its content as a researcher of men's communities and their anti-equity, anti-women, anti-feminism views. But, at the same day and time that I looked at the /r/MensRights most popular post (about 10pm, June 25, 2021), I opened

the top (active)[149] post in /r/pics in a second tab and it had over 108,000 upvotes and over 6,500 comments. The post was less than 10 hours old and depicts the front door of the Saskatoon Catholic cathedral vandalized with red paint handprints and the words "we were children" (figure 9-3). At less than 12 hours old, it has almost four times the upvote engagement than
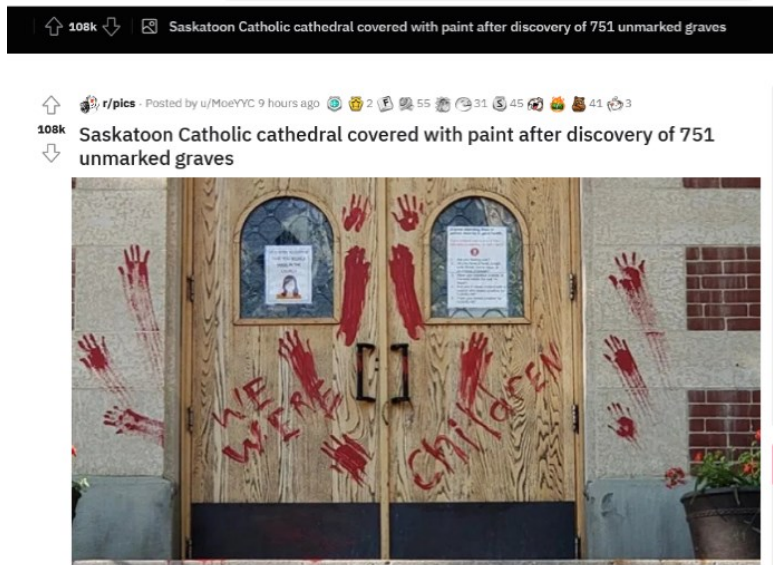

Figure 9-3: Image of Saskatoon Catholic cathedral front door - /u/MoeYYC post to /r/pics June 25, 2021.

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[148] The post is archived, meaning that it will no longer accept comments.

[149] So, not the top post of all time as in the /r/MensRights example, but simply the post that appeared at the top of /r/pics when sorted by hot at that day and time.

the most popular /r/MensRights post ever, and the engagement (or at least what I read in the top several parent comments) is decidedly more positive overall.[150] Knowing that even at their most popular, subreddits like /r/MensRights are a fraction of reddit's usership helps me keep the scope of their influence and messaging in perspective, and reminds me that when I read "SO sick of screaming harpy idiotic feminists unable to cope with facts/evidence," I can just close reddit and come back another time.
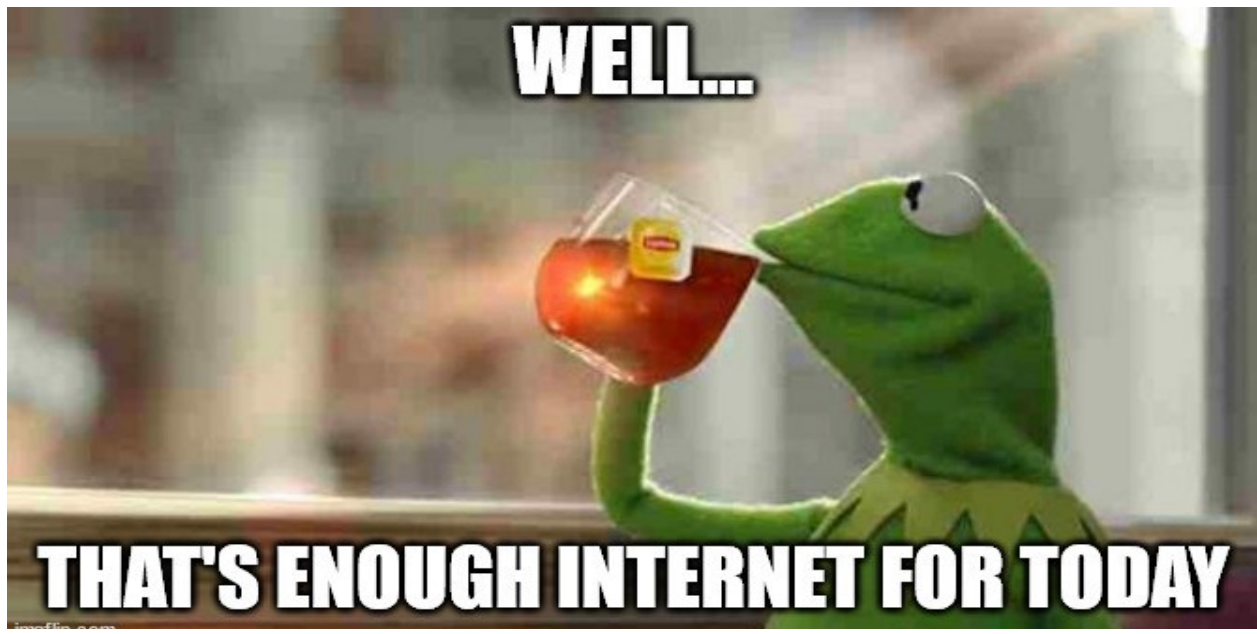

Figure 9-4: Kermit Tea Meme: Enough Internet - imgflip.com.

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[150] When I say positive here, I mean in speaking out about Catholic complicity in Canadian residential schools, the powerfulness of the activist art, and calls for action.

Letter of Copyright Permission

Edited versions of chapters 5 and 6 were published prior to the approval of the final version of this dissertation.

Chapter 5:

"Entitled to everything responsible for nothing:" Gendered Discourses of Antifeminism, Biological Determinism, and Violence in Two Communities of Reddit's Manosphere

Citation:

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Open Access: https://riviste.unige.it/index.php/aboutgender/article/view/1274

Chapter 6:

"A Positive Identity for Men"? Pathways to far-right participation through /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill

Citation:

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Luc Cousineau

From:	Rachel Twombly <RTwombly@rowman.com>
Sent:	October 22, 2021 8:09 PM
To:	Luc Cousineau
Subject:	RE: Quick question about thesis use of book chapter

Dear Dr. Cousineau,

Permission is granted non-exclusive and no fee to reprint your chapter "A Positive Identity for Men" from *Rise of the Far Right* in your forthcoming thesis. Please cite by title, author, publisher, all rights reserved.

Best,
Rachel

Rachel Twombly
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Lanham, MD 20706
www.rowman.com
T: 301-459-3366 ext. 5420
F: 301-429-5748

From: Luc Cousineau <luc.cousineau@uwaterloo.ca>
Sent: Friday, October 22, 2021 12:17 PM
To: Rachel Twombly <RTwombly@rowman.com>
Subject: Quick question about thesis use of book chapter

Hello Rachel,

I just have a quick question about a book chapter from the book *Rise of the Far Right: Technologies of Recruitment and Mobilization,* Devries, Bessant, and Watts (Eds.). 978-1-78661-492-6
I have a chapter in this book that also appears as a modified version in my thesis. I am hoping that you can clarify what the policy is from Rowman and Littlefield about the inclusion of this modified material, if I require permissions beyond the publishing agreement for the book (I do not have a copy), and if so, how I might go about getting that permission? My thesis defence occurred before the book was released, but the final submission of the thesis is happening after I clear this away.

Thank you in advance for your help,

Luc Cousineau

Luc S. Cousineau, Ph.D.
(he/him | they/them)
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies
University of Waterloo

1

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