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#MasculinitySoFragile: culture, structure, and networked misogyny

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In September 2015, the hashtag #MasculinitySoFragile was trending on Twitter. The ostensible purpose of the hashtag was to illustrate the precariousness of “toxic masculinity,” a (heterosexual) masculinity that is threatened by anything associated with femininity (whether that is pink yogurt or emotions). Certain groups of men conflated this attack on the construct of *masculinity* with an attack on *maleness* and responded, rather ironically, in a macho and violent manner. In a tweet that became emblematic of the entire kerfuffle, Twitter user Mech of Justice (@mechofjusticewz) sneered, “I challenge any female tweeting unironically with #MasculinitySoFragile to last three rounds against me in a fight. We’ll see who’s fragile.”

We are in a new era of the gender wars, an era that is marked by alarming amounts of vitriol and violence directed toward women in online spaces. These forms of violence are not only about gender, but are also often racist, with women of color as particular targets. The scope and reach of this aggression has garnered attention not only from feminist scholars, but in popular discourse, where it has been widely critiqued. Indeed, there have been a wide variety of explanations in both popular and academic press as to why this particular historical moment is host to an especially virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women in online environments—a phenomenon that we refer to here as “networked misogyny.” Anonymity is a common culprit (Kat Stoeffel 2014), as are the technical affordances, structures, and policies of online platforms (Sarah Jeong 2015). For some, trolls are the problem (Erin E. Buckels, Paul D. Trapnell, and Delroy L. Paulhus 2014); for others, the insufficiency of our legal frameworks (Danielle K. Citron 2014). While these are all certainly contributing factors, we find that they overlook the full range (and interplay) of cultural factors at hand.

In particular, we feel that these explanations for online harassment (and other forms of networked misogyny) fail to acknowledge the structuring nature of misogyny; attributing violence against women to technological elements, an insufficient legal system, anomalous individuals, or other factors encourages a distraction from the deeply embedded contextual factors that legitimate the logic of misogyny. That is, misogyny is not only widespread and deeply entrenched in Western culture, it is naturalized. The focus on technical and legal elements, while important, thus becomes a means to address specific components of networked misogyny, rather than fighting what seems to be an insurmountable cultural and normative battle.

At the same time that the popular press has been focusing on various expressions of toxic masculinity, there has also been another cultural phenomenon that has captured widespread attention: popular feminism. Popular feminism lives in hashtags like #everydaysexism and #bringbackourgirls; in best-selling memoirs by Sheryl Sandberg and Lena Dunham; on Tumblr and on Facebook; emblazoned on tank tops and embodied by pop stars. Beyoncé’s highly public ownership of feminism at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards made headlines and set off a round of public deliberation about what Bey’s move meant for the embattled term. Years before this event, however, feminism and “empowerment” campaigns began to be promoted by corporations and non-profits alike, positioning consumerism or skill-building as panaceas for an ideological and structural issue. From the maxi pads of Always to the

mouse pads of Girls Who Code, issues involving the systemic discrimination against women and girls became the new black (or pink).

While popular feminisms have varied goals and different means of expression, there is a predominant theme: what women need is self-confidence. In the workforce, women need to “lean in” and overcome “imposter syndrome”; in educational spaces, women need to assert themselves as smart and capable; perhaps most of all, in their inner selves, they simply need to *be* more confident and sure of themselves to overcome the often structural and societal problems that are keeping them down. Of course, only particular women have access to “leaning in” in the first place; gendered dynamics of power intersect with racial dynamics so that women of color are structurally inhibited to an even greater degree.

The heightened visibility of popular feminism and its accompanying message of confidence has been met by another popular discourse: popular misogyny. Popular misogyny is, at its core, a basic anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms. This popular circulation helps contribute in heightened ways to a misogynistic political and economic culture, where rape culture is normative, violent threats against women are validated, and rights of the body for women are either under threat or being formally retracted. Popular misogyny responds in part to the unprecedented frequency of expressions of popular feminism articulated on multiple media channels and in a variety of contexts. As more and more women are encouraged to be self-confident and have high self-esteem (indeed, spawning a “confidence movement”), some men—particularly those who ascribe to the tenets of toxic masculinity highlighted in #MasculinitySoFragile—perceive this as an attack on their rightful place in the social hierarchy.

In particular, two interrelated groups—Men’s Rights Activists and Pick-Up Artists (or “seduction communities”)—have responded to this “threat” by taking up some of the dominant themes of popular feminism—empowerment and confidence—and reframing and rearticulating them as misogynistic statements and practices. Here, a masculine lack of confidence and perceived lack of empowerment identify a clear culprit: women and feminism.

It is important here to note that the men who comprise the Men’s Rights Activists and Pick-Up Artists (MRA/PUA) communities are not men that are considered to be hegemonically masculine. In fact, the primary demographic of the MRA/PUA movement is young men who fall into the “geek/nerd” category. Surprisingly, they claim to campaign for many of the same things that feminists want, including acceptance of alternative masculinities and expanded parenting roles for men. How is it, then, that these men are connected to campaigns such as #GamerGate, whose primary tactics involve silencing women and threatening them with violence?

Arthur Chu, *The Daily Beast’s* columnist on all things geek and nerd, has blamed this state of affairs on a culture that teaches geeky young men that “women, like money and status, are just part of the reward we get for doing well,” and that popular misogyny is part of the (unwarranted) response when these men “get good grades, they get a decent job, and that wife they were promised in the package deal doesn’t arrive” (Arthur Chu 2014). However, what Chu and others have failed to note is that #GamerGate and other incidents of weaponized misogyny are not simply a response to entitlements that never came to fruition. They are also a response to the incursion of women and people of color into what were previously almost exclusively white, male spaces.

While the presence of popular feminism explains in part the emergence of a heightened form of popular misogyny, it doesn’t entirely explain why popular misogyny is so dominant in

online environments—why networked misogyny persists as it does. Certainly, the capacity to create, find, and build interest-based communities has been a key feature of the internet, long before the advent of the “social web.” However, to attribute the prevalence of this particular ideology and practice in certain web communities is to overlook the considerable overlap in cultural and social norms that exists between the bastions of popular misogyny and the communities that most clearly bear the imprint of the web’s masculinist, military–scientific social origins.

Fred Turner (2010) and Lori Kendall (2002) have traced the sociocultural foundations of the social web to the largely white, largely male users originating in the scientific and military industrial complexes of the mid-twentieth century. In these cultures, aggression was accepted (if not standard) and Habermasian rational-critical speech was privileged. While early studies on computer-mediated communication blamed the rampant antagonism that characterized early web forums on the lack of visual and social cues available through the medium (Sara Kiesler, Jane Siegel, and Timothy W. McGuire 1984), other scholars recognized that, in fact, social norms were a key factor (Martin Lea and Russell Spears 1991). Scholars focused on trolling and meme cultures of the late 2000s (Ryan M. Milner 2013; Kate M. Miltner 2014; Whitney Phillips 2015) have pointed out that these normative structures continue to operate in primarily white, male-dominated “geek” spaces. As women and people of color started to participate in these environments, pushback became a common response. One of the Men’s Rights manifestos published during #GamerGate argued that games needed to be a women-free “safe space” for male nerds in order to circumvent the “conflict and alienation” caused by “female feminists migrating to formerly male spaces, demanding to be accommodated” (David Futrelle 2014).

This fear of female encroachment is far from relegated to online social spaces: men are also threatened by potential economic loss as a result of this apparent feminine invasion. In a historical context of global economic recession, the impact on men has not only been attributed to a more systemic financial failure, but more specifically because women are seen as taking jobs—including those in the technology fields—that are somehow the “natural” right of men. As Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker explain,

the financial crisis promulgates cultural themes of male infantilism and underdevelopment, circulates tropes of male injury in which white men are positioned as both sign and symptom of economic contraction and generates a strange sort of “zero sum” thinking when it comes to the experiences of men and women in recession (i.e. if women are gaining, men must be losing). (2014: 8–9)

The injury of economic recession is transformed into male injury, specifically caused by women.

With this piece, we hope to have provided a jumping off point for a larger program of research that examines the deeply entwined contexts and elements that undergird networked misogyny. Rather than attacking the individual heads of the patriarchal hydra, we argue that all forms of patriarchy need to be assessed differently—and collectively—in the current, networked era. To truly understand—and combat—popular misogyny in its networked forms, we need to look at it as a whole, and not independently at its individual parts.

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Recouping masculinity: men's rights activists' responses to *Mad Max: Fury Road*

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The oft-cited "crisis of masculinity"—the notion that Western "masculinity is troubled, anxious, fissured, [and] unable to cope with the alienating dynamics of contemporary globalized capitalism" (Brian Baker 2015, 1; see also Roger Horrocks 1994)—was evoked by the recent release of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015, ed. Miller). The crisis was provoked not so much by the film itself but, rather, by men's rights activists' (MRA) responses to it.

The "manosphere"¹ erupted in May 2015 just before the film's initial release. At the misogynist website *Return of Kings*, Aaron Clarey (2015) denounced the film as "a feminist piece of propaganda posing as a guy flick." After watching only the trailer, he urged readers to boycott the film. According to Clarey, if *Mad Max: Fury Road* was a box-office success, the "world [would] never be able to see a real action movie ever again that doesn't contain some damn political lecture or moray [sic] about feminism" (Clarey 2015). A number of online news outlets—such as *Time* and *Vice News*—picked up the story, reporting a full-scale boycott by the MR movement, simultaneously lauding the film as a feminist triumph. While there was no official boycott, MRA grievances were nevertheless prevalent among their online communities. At one MRA web forum, for example, a member advised others to "make an informed