Centre for Digital Trust and Security

Seedcorn Final Report 23/24

Project Title: Misogyny and online gender-based violence

Project Investigators:
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Project overview:
Sexism and misogyny abound and structure our everyday lives. Recently, they have taken new
forms in online spaces. One venue is the 'manosphere'— online communities of disaffected males
where speech about gender-based violence is amplified and normalized. These communities
espouse an ideology that encourages participating boys and men to view and treat women in dehumanising
ways. It promotes a culture of patriarchal violence that serves to police gender
norms, so as to ensure that women conform to traditional gender roles. This culture justifies violence when
women deviate from these roles and norms. At the heart of this ideology is a
narrative of aggrieved entitlement and reversed victimhood motivated by anger and grievance. In
this project we study how this narrative is deployed in incel (involuntary celibate) communities and how it's
used to justify violent extremism.

This project is a continuation of Seedcorn project 2022/2023. In the previous project, we scraped over 6
million comments from a popular incel forum and started linguistic and theoretical analysis of the data. In
this project, we continued the analysis of the data and developed theoretical avenues. Whilst often projects
concerning misogyny focus on the target of misogynistic speech (i.e. woman) this project highlights the way
in which the perpetrators of misogynistic speech construct their identities in relation to an ideology that
facilitates misogyny.

Key findings:

Empirical Side:

- We established clear hierarchies in the incel forum based on the number of posts from the users,
  these are categorised into 4 groups: 'greycels' (new members), low-rank, high-rank, and 'paragon'
  (the highest ranks). Further, we classified 2 groups of users who have been expelled from the
  community – banned users – and users who have chosen to leave – self-banned/deleted users. We
  found clear linguistic patterns among different groups; we discovered that high-rank users tend to
  police other members; we found that specific topics (e.g. mentioning a lot of statistics and asking
  questions were common among 'banned' users.

- We employed 'move analysis' to explore the self-referent use of 'subhuman' in the incel community. Lily (the linguistics RA) manually coded 14 different moves/communicative functions, e.g. subhuman was used in order to establish 'truecel' status, refer to one's appearance, and describe how others perceive them. We hypothesise that referring to oneself as a 'subhuman' plays a vital part in establishing incel identities.

Theoretical Side:

- Taboos are exploited in the community as a way to distinguish 'us vs them' divide. Acting contrary to mainstream norms is vital, hence using slurs, aggressive language, and self-derogatory content.
- Incels create novel terms using the -cel suffix (e.g. height*cel* = incels because of one's height). They use these neologisms to revise their social role of a man that expects them to pursue heterosexual relationships into ideological roles that highlight how not all men can dominate women and engage in heterosexual relationships. Importantly, the forum provides a safe space in which terms like 'heightcel', 'uglycel', 'wristcel' carry no stigma or shame as they would in offline reality.
- In certain contexts, the use of misogynistic and homophobic slurs can be seen as compensatory masculinity speech acts. We propose that this is an under-researched function of slurs in philosophy and argue for that we can think of slurs in such contexts as having illocutionary compensatory force.
- Incels take themselves to be creating new hermeneutic resources via the 'black pill' ideology. We identified three reasons for why these are not fruitful hermeneutic resources: (i) incel tools do not aim for equality (they wish to subordinate women and keep themselves in a low-status social position); (ii) Incel ideology does not entail consistency (e.g. certain concepts, such as lookism, are utilised as a social phenomenon in other contexts its seen to follow from biological essentialism); (iii) tools provided by the black pill prevent any possibility for intra/inter-group reflection.
- Incels employ the taboos of mainstream society to construct their communities. These include engaging in misogynistic and self-loathing speech. Such practices are encouraged and rewarded on the forum.

Outputs to date:

Research Dissemination, Presentations & Workshops

- **[Nov 2024]** Popa-Wyatt, M. TBD. University of Valencia.
- **[Nov 2024]** Popa-Wyatt, M. TBD. University of Edinburgh.
- **[Oct 2024]** Ronzoni, M., Herissone-Kelly, R., Popa-Wyatt, M., Berškytė, J., Chadwick, T., and Deshmukh, A. 'Which Forms of Conceptual Engineering Should We Trust? submitted to Conference on Feminist Epistemology: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue. University of Lisbon.
- **[Sep 2024]** Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'Platform speech should be libertas not gratis'. LMU Münich.
- **[Sep 2024]** Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'Mitigating Unfairness'. University of Manchester.
- **[Aug 2024]** Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'Can We Reduce Online Hate While Maintaining Free Speech?'. Workshop on Expressivity and Meaning. Buenos Aires.
- **[Aug 2024]** Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'Hate and Social Norms'. Invited to Panel on *Institutional Inertia and Institutional Wrongs*. International Congress of Philosophy. Rome [could not travel]
- **[July 2024]** Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'An Ontology of Discourse in Social Norm Change'. Social Ontology Conference, University of Duke, USA. [could not travel]
- **[July 2024]** A public lecture by Prof Mary Kate McGowan followed by a workshop 'Social Norms and Oppressive Structures' organised by Mihaela Popa-Wyatt & Justina Berškytė. https://events.manchester.ac.uk/event/event:e8t-lw7jrp3p-mv3ka1/social-norms-and-oppressive-structures
- **[July 2024]** Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'Speech, Norms, and Games'. Workshop 'Social Norms and Oppressive Structures'. University of Manchester.

- **[July 2024]** A Panel on Online Harms: To be part of the CDTS annual forum, organiser & chair Mihaela Popa-Wyatt (3rd of July).
- **[June 2024]** Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. Hate speech and Free speech. Workshop on 'What does freedom of speech require today?', Queens University, Belfast.
- **[June 2024]** Justina Berškytė and Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. Criminology Seminar, Manchester.
- **[March 2024]** Justina Berškytė. 'Misogyny and Incel Ideology'. International conference: Understanding Offence: Delimiting the (Un)sayable'. University of Durham. [could not travel]
- **[March 2024]** Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'The Challenges of Regulating Online Speech'. International conference: Understanding Offence: Delimiting the (Un)sayable'. University of Durham. [could not travel]
- **[March 2024]** Justina Berškytė and Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'Incels & Language: Ideological Roles and the Blackpill'. CDTS research seminar - Showcase from Seed corn projects.
- **[March 2024]** Justina Berškytė and Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'Woman, the Scapegoat: From Loneliness to Misogyny' presented at 'Politicized Loneliness: Perspectives on Hate, Extremism, and Radicalization'—University of Helsinki, Finland.
- **[February 2024]** Justina Berškytė & Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'Woman, the Scapegoat: Misogyny in Online Discourse'. "The Third Annual Colloquium for the European Society of Criminology Working Group on Radicalization, Extremism, and Terrorism and the University of Portsmouth Centre for Cybercrime and Economic Crime" — University of Portsmouth, UK.
- **[February 2024]** Veronika Solopova, , Mihaela Popa-Wyatt, Justina Berškytė. 'Incels Hierarchy and Group-boundaries Policing'. "The Third Annual Colloquium for the European Society of Criminology Working Group on Radicalization, Extremism, and Terrorism and the University of Portsmouth Centre for Cybercrime and Economic Crime" — University of Portsmouth, UK.
- **[December 2023]** Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. 'Slurs shifting social norms.' Moral Language workshop. — Institute Jean Nicod. Paris.

Written: journals

- Berškytė, J. & Popa-Wyatt, M. ***forthcoming.*** 'Resistance through Revision: Reclamation and Ideological Roles for Incels'. *Topoi* SI: 'Slurring Terms Across Languages' editors Isidora Stojanovic and Dan Zeman.

- Popa-Wyatt, M & Jonathan Ginzburg. ***forthcoming.*** Slurs and their Oppressive History: a Dialogical Account. *Topoi* SI: 'Slurring Terms Across Languages' editors Isidora Stojanovic and Dan Zeman.

- Popa-Wyatt, M. ***forthcoming***. Norms-Shifting through Oppressive Speech. In M*ind, Language, and Social Hierarchy: constructing a shared social world*. Editors: Sally Haslanger, Karen Jones, Greg Restall, François Schroeter, and Laura Schroeter.

- 2024 (Berškytė, J.) The Good, the Bad, and the Harmful: From Restricted to Standard Uses of Slurs. in Popa-Wyatt, M (ed). Harmful Speech and Contestation Palgrave MacMillan, pp 13-35. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-60537-6_2

- 2024 (Popa-Wyatt, M & Jeremy L. Wyatt) Games, Norms, and Utterances. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements. Vol 95. Words and Worlds: New Directions in the Philosophy of Language. pp. 73 – 86. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000055

- 2024 (Popa-Wyatt, M) Introduction. Harmful Speech and Contestation. Palgrave MacMillan. pp 1-10. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-60537-6_1

Under review

1) Popa-Wyatt, M. and Berškytė, J. 'Taboo and Counterculture: Normalising Misogyny in Incel Communities and Beyond' **under revisions** for *Journal for Social Philosophy*.
2) Ronzoni, M., Herissone-Kelly, R., Popa-Wyatt, M., Berškytė, J., Chadwick, T., and Deshmukh, A. 'Which Forms of Conceptual Engineering Should We Trust?' **under review** at *The Philosophical Quarterly* for SI: 'Epistemic Injustice'
3) Berškytė, J., Valoschi, A., & Popa-Wyatt, M. 'When Feeling Under Threat: The Role of Slurs and Compensatory Masculinities' **under review** at *Synthese.*
4) Solopova, V., Popa-Wyatt, M. & Berškytė, J. 'Exploring Incel Group Dynamics: A Computational Study of Hierarchy and Group-Boundary Policing' **under review** *Journal of Computational Social Science.*
5) Zahid, I., Solopova, V., Berškytė, J., Popa-Wyatt, M., & Batista-Navarro, R. 'Transferring Commonsense Knowledge: Decosing Incel Sentiments for hate-speech detection' **under review** at the 31st International Conference on Computational Linguistics.
6) Zahid, I., Solopova, V., Berškytė, J., Popa-Wyatt, M., & Batista-Navarro, R. 'Topic and emotion modelling for niche hate-speech detection' **under review** at the 31st International Conference on Computational Linguistics

7) Barker, S. & Popa-Wyatt, M. 'Slurs Sting: Harming, Blocking, and the Intersubjective Dimension of Communication'. **under review** In *Oppressive Speech and Society*. (ed) Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. Routledge.

8) Popa-Wyatt, M. 'Oppressive Speech: Carry-Over Effect'. **under review** at *Journal of Philosophy*.

Work in Progress
- Bekkers, M. & Popa-Wyatt, M. 'Joint Commitments to Incel Communities'.
- Calloway, L., Zahid, I., Popa-Wyatt, M., Berškytė, J., Harrington, L., 'Move Analysis of the self-referent use of 'subhuman' in incel forums'. To be submitted to *Discourse and Analysis*.
- Chadwick, T., Popa-Wyatt, Pilkington, H. The case of incels and reducing the violence against women and girls. (draft policy brief to be sent to Policy@Manchester).
- Berškytė, J., Valoschi, A., & Popa-Wyatt, M. 'Compensatory Manhood Acts: a Case for Illocutionary Pluralism.'
- Berškytė, J., & Popa-Wyatt, M. 'Incel Ideologies: Redemption Narratives and Authoritarianism'.

Blogs
- Berškytė, J., 'The Function of Misogynistic and Derogatory Speech in Incel Communities'. Blog for *Open for Debate*.
- Popa-Wyatt, M. & Berškytė, J. 'Incels and the Threat of Extreme Misogyny'. Blog to be pitched to *Aeon, American Philosophy Association - technology blog; The New Stateman; The Guardian, TES magazine.*
- 'Online Harms: Rebuilding Trust in the Online World'. Blog with Mary Kate McGowan, Jacob Rowbottom, Emma Barrett, Mihaela Popa-Wyatt, to be pitched to *The Conversation.*

Editorial
- Popa-Wyatt, M. 2024. *Harmful Speech and Contestation*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Popa-Wyatt, M. *Oppressive Speech and Society*. Routledge.
- Popa-Wyatt, M. *Disinformation and Epistemological Pathologies*. Cambridge University Press.

Grants
- SoSS Small Grant: Mihaela Popa-Wyatt. Grant to help to fund a workshop in July.

- UMRI Pump Priming Award. PI: Mihaela Popa-Wyatt, Co-PI: Riza Batista-Navarro, Research Assistants: Justina Berškytė (University of Manchester), Veronika Solopova (TU Berlin), Lilian von Bressendorf (LMU Munich). Project title: 'How Dialogue Fractures: The Social Dynamics of Misinformation in the Digital Age'

- ISOS Social Ontology grant. Mihaela Popa-Wyatt (unsuccessful)

- Mind Conference grant.

Collaboration
- Ongoing collaboration with researchers in criminology: Allysa Czerwinsky (Manchester) & Lisa Sugiura (Portsmouth)
- Ongoing collaboration with a computational linguist Veronika Solopova (Berlin)
- New collaboration with an academic from politics Robert Herissone-Kelly (Manchester), and academics from philosophy Ajinkya Deshmukh (Manchester) and Chris Cousens (Stirling).

Impact (Mihaela Popa-Wyatt)

- Ian Lucas and Emma Barrett on Digital Security, Policy@Manchester. (Dec 2023)

- Simona-Mirela Miculescu (President of the UNESCO General Conference, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Paris). (Dec 2023)

- Invited on the panel for Commission for Countering Extremism: Government roundtable opportunity (disinformation) (Feb 2024) [could not travel]

- Anna-Lena von Hodenberg (Founder of HateAid, Berlin) (July 2024)

- Talking to Matilda Martin from TES magazine. (August 2024)

Were all planned outcomes achieved?
If not, how did you mitigate non-achievement?

We feel that we achieved the majority of the outcomes were met. Some planned outcomes naturally developed into different projects. For example, the content from 'Women, the Scapegoat' paper ended up contributing to two papers listed in the 'under review' section (papers (2) and (3)) as well as, a future paper we're planning to write on illocutionary pluralism.

Other projects were put to one side due to specific deadlines detailed below.
- *The Philosophical Quarterly* SI deadline was the 30th of June. Due to the journal's prestige, we felt it was better to spend the month of June trying to finish off the paper on conceptual engineering whilst leaving some other projects for future investigation.
- The forthcoming paper ('Resistance through Revision) had its revisions due by the 27th of June.

Due to anticipated difficulties concerning author agreement rates in the Move Analysis paper (Manuscript section) and some personal circumstances of RAs, we are still working on the empirical findings concerning incel forums.

The mitigation for the unfinished projects is to keep working on them outside the project's timeline.

Planned activities post-project:

Keep the collaborative efforts going.

Finish off under review material as well as submit the two manuscripts.

Collaborate on a manuscript (Mihaela, Justina & Adelina) with a scholar from Stirling (Chris Cousens). This will be a theoretical paper concerning the nature of speech acts on the incel forums.

Write a policy report based on the research of the two seedcorn projects (Mihaela Popa-Wyatt & Tom Chadwich).