

ABSTRACT

Donald Trump's 2016 electoral victory was a shock for feminist scholars, yet it was no surprise to his legion of supporters in Alt-Right digital spaces. In this essay, we analyze one of the online forums that helped propel Donald Trump to electoral victory. Drawing on social movement concepts and an analysis of 1,762 posts, we show how leaders of the forum "The Red Pill" were able to move a community of adherents from understanding men's rights as a "personal philosophy" to political action. This transition was no small endeavor. The Red Pill forum was explicitly apolitical until the summer before the 2016 election. During the election, forum leaders linked the forum's neoliberal, misogynistic collective identity of "alpha masculinity" to Donald Trump's public persona, and framed his political ascendance as an opportunity to effectively push back against feminism and get a "real" man into the White House. We argue that while previous research shows the importance of Alt-Right virtual spaces in creating and maintaining racist collective identities, we know very little about how men conceptualize gender in ways that inform their personal and political action - and this is to our detriment. We conclude the essay by arguing that feminists need to understand how men cultivate extreme personal and political identities in online forums so that they can better understand how new technologies are used to move individuals from the armchair to the streets.

INTRODUCTION

*"When somebody accuses a powerful or famous figure like Trump of 'sexual assault,' I don't look the other way. I don't denounce them or their behavior. Instead I run towards them, because there is no truer signal which side somebody is on, than when they're given a bogus accusation by the establishment. **This is our beacon to find allies in the war** [emphasis in original]."*

-redpillschool, moderator, 2016 Men's Rights post

Donald Trump shocked the world by emerging victorious in the 2016 U.S presidential election. His victory was celebrated by many, including the Alt-Right, which is an extremist movement comprised predominantly of young men who embrace white nationalism and anti-Semitism (Southern Poverty Law Center 2012, Lyons 2017). Popularly represented by the self-proclaimed Nazi Richard Spencer, propaganda "news" sites such as *Breitbart* and *Daily Stormer*, and the White Supremacist forum Stormfront (Bowman-Grieve 2009), the Alt-Right seeks to upend traditional conservatism and build a male-dominated "white state." Among other

complaints, the Alt-Right lament men's status in Western society, arguing that men are under attack by "leftism," "political correctness," and feminism. In their view, feminism has distorted the natural gender order and demasculinized men, to the detriment of modern society (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016; Ferber 2000).

The Alt-Right positions itself as (white) men's salvation, promising to help men reclaim their natural manhood and usurp women's social, political, and economic power (Ferber 2000).¹ In essence, the Alt-Right offers "men's rights activists," or individuals who make this pro-male attitude central to their identity politics, a solution to the "woman problem:" organized misogyny (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016). This "solution" is problematic for a number of reasons, including the fact that it ignores that social and economic precarity are the fruits of neoliberal policies and practices, and that men are not the only group affected by these developments (Berlant 2011). Additionally, it fails to acknowledge that the "popular feminism" under attack by the Alt-Right often champions the central tenets of neoliberalism - the importance of self-empowerment, personal responsibility and consumption to individual success - rather than the concrete social change offered by political feminism (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017; McRobbie 2009). Their attack on feminism, in short, is an unsophisticated critique of a neoliberal political project that exploits gender for profit (Harvey 2005; Mendes 2012), ironically creating a "popular misogyny" as a backlash to popular feminism (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016), and to an increasingly gender-neutral "feminized state" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). While claims of male oppression certainly are not new, as the once popular "mythopoetic men" and "men's liberation" movements demonstrate (Ferber 2000; Messner 1998), the call for "men's rights" is increasingly visible online and in mainstream politics (Jane 2014, 2016; Sobieraj 2017).

This ascendance of men's rights from marginal online forums such as 4chan and Reddit to electoral politics and the White House is alarming for at least two reasons. First, it signals that anti-feminism is more virulent than previously believed. While there has never been a shortage of pushback against gender equity projects (Faludi 1991, Cohen 1996), radical groups including white supremacists and men's rights activists tend to organize – and stay – outside of mainstream politics.² This is in part because some advocates understand men's liberation as a private “personal philosophy” that requires changes in thinking and behavior, rather than political action. However, something has changed among adherents of these groups insofar as men's rights activists increasingly regard their (white) pro-male identities as more than a personal philosophy. They believe that if they identify and act collectively as men, they can affect political change. The election of a man who brags about sexually assaulting women illustrates the efficacy of this conviction.

Second, and related, feminists are not always aware of what is happening in these extreme online communities - or of the potential political strength of these communities - until it is too late. Donald Trump's social media strategy included, among other things, “shit-posting” Hillary Clinton to mobilize Alt-Right men against her³, a strategy that was underestimated by many feminists. To be clear, feminist scholars have done their fair share of difficult work analyzing anti-feminist and White Supremacist movements and, more recently, trolling online.⁴ The point here is that feminists need to be willing to study online communities that they find abhorrent if they are to understand and counter them.

In this essay, we analyze one of the online forums that helped propel Donald Trump to electoral victory (Martin 2017). Drawing on social movement concepts and an analysis of 1,762 posts, we show how leaders of the forum “The Red Pill” were able to move a community of

adherents from understanding men's rights as a "personal philosophy" to political action. As we illustrate, this was no small move. The Red Pill forum was explicitly opposed to political involvement until the summer before the 2016 election. Users and forum leaders rejected political action because they associated it with "mainstream" men's rights movements. This changed months before the election. Leaders and elite users of the forum heralded Donald Trump's candidacy as an opportunity to push back against feminism and get a "real man" into the White House. While this mobilization may have been short lived, it was highly successful. We argue that while previous research illuminates the importance of Alt-Right virtual spaces such as Stormfront for the cultivation and maintenance of a racist collective identity (Blee 2002; Caren, Jowers and Gaby 2012; Futrell and Simi 2004), we know very little about how men conceptualize gender in ways that inform their personal and political action (see Messner 1998 as an exception) - and this is to our detriment. We conclude the essay by arguing that feminists need to understand how men cultivate extreme personal and political identities in virtual spaces so that we can better understand how new technologies are used to move these individuals from their armchairs to the voting booth.

CONCEPTUALIZING MEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Resistance to gender equality is not new. In 1991, Susan Faludi documented backlash against feminism, noting, among other points, that mass media played a critical role in elevating unsupported arguments regarding the negative effects of feminism on women's lives. These myths, which were pushed by New Right organizations, were designed to erode support for feminism and encourage women to return to their homes with their children (Hall and Rodriguez 2003; Marshall 1985). Anti-feminist ideas, however, have become more pervasive – and far more personal – in the digital age. Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs) provide men's

rights activists relative anonymity and the ability to confront women one-on-one, making the Internet the territory of choice for extremist misogynistic discourse (Sobieraj 2017).

Online, men's rights activists adopt a position of "patriarchal resistance," which forcefully denies that feminist issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, and gendered wage-gaps are structural issues that (re)produce women's oppression (Berns 2001). Proponents reject the idea that individual men are responsible for perpetuating gender inequality, and instead argue that feminism has systematically reduced men's social, political, and economic opportunities, which has resulted in the oppression of men (Ferber 2000; Hall and Rodriguez 2003). These ideas found legs online, in part because claims-making is increasingly personalized. Individuals are not required to "buy-in" to ideologies whole cloth. They can pick, choose, and customize ideas that resonate with their lives (Bennett 2012). It does not hurt that individuals can prescribe to these ideas while hiding their "real" identities. Online, anonymous spaces such as Stormfront, Reddit, and 4chan are appealing because individuals can mask their identities and express agreement with extreme views without their friends and neighbors finding out (Caren, Jowers, and Gaby 2012, Beyer 2014, Hine et al. 2017).

These virtual forums provide spaces where individuals can cultivate community and oppositional consciousness (Caren, Jowers and Gaby 2012; Mansbridge and Morris 2001). Our use of oppositional consciousness requires explanation. Feminists and social movement scholars alike use oppositional consciousness to refer to an "empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to undermine, reform, or overthrow a dominant system" (Mansbridge and Morris 2001, 25; also see Sandoval 1991). While the young, white men who populate these forums are not oppressed and, in fact, benefit from the dominant system, they do use these virtual spaces to cultivate their "patriarchal resistance" and specify which behaviors

correspond with this ideology. Since, as we discuss in greater detail below, “patriarchal resistance” is constructed in opposition to popular feminism and its proponents, it is helpful to conceptualize the process by which men’s rights proponents make sense of their grievances and devise solutions to their shared problem as oppositional consciousness (see also Mansbridge 1986). More importantly from our perspective, the cultivation of oppositional consciousness does not presume that individuals will (or do) engage in political action (Mansbridge and Morris 2001). It simply creates an ideological framework for understanding the causes of and solutions to their grievances and cultivates a sense of “we-ness,” or collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001) among participants, which keeps individuals engaged over time – even in online forums (Beyer 2014; Rohlinger and Bunnage 2015, 2017).⁵

Of course, collective identities can become politicized and move proponents from the armchair to the streets. “Politicized collective identity” refers to an identity that not only connects individuals to a community and a cause larger than themselves, but also provides an explicit rationale for political involvement (Simon and Klandermans 2001). A politicized collective identity often identifies with both an aggrieved group (e.g., other individuals participating in an online forum) and a larger polity (e.g., the nation state), which provides a context for political struggle (Simon and Klandermans 2001). Not surprisingly, the politicization of a collective identity may be tied to political opportunities, or moments when meaningful institutional change appears to be in reach (Simon and Klandermans 2001; Bernstein 2005). This shift to politicization is gendered insofar as men’s rights proponents see an opportunity to reinforce systemic gendered arrangements and, more specifically, white, male power and privilege.⁶

There are four additional, related points worth making regarding the shift from oppositional consciousness to politicized collective identity. First, neither oppositional consciousness nor a politicized collective identity requires adherents to have an accurate or nuanced understanding of the social, political, or economic issues around which they mobilize. This is certainly true of men's rights activists, who are threatened by anything associated with femininity (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016) and blame the feminization of work and America's crumbling dream of upward mobility on women and feminism, rather than neoliberalism (Berlant 2011). Men's rights activists fail to grasp that the popular feminism championed by celebrities, female CEOs, and corporations undercuts the power base needed to influence social structures and gender institutions in the ways that they catastrophize (Ferber 2000; McRobbie 2009).

Second, emotion plays an important role in politicization (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Jasper 2011). Opinion leaders in online forums prey on the insecurities of participants and use emotions such as fear and anger to induce political participation (Jasper 2011). For instance, the individuals who are key to developing oppositional consciousness can effectively use emotion to frame political moments – or political candidates – as threatening to (or supportive of) a cause and a collective identity. Savvy leaders can effectively stoke adherents' emotions in ways that cast political engagement as an extension (and obligation) of a collectivity (Benford and Snow 2000).

Third, forum leaders play an important role in the politicization of collective identity insofar as they are charged with convincing adherents that political engagement will pay off. Of course, in the digital era, leadership looks quite different than it did in the past. Leaders can establish and exercise a great deal of control over a forum, or they can allow others to engage in

“leading tasks” and perform the work of a leader without the title (Earl and Schussman 2004; Earl 2007). Finally, the politicization of collective identity changes a forum and, consequently, who participates in it. The politicization of a collective identity requires leaders to strategically resituate a collective relative to a larger polity – and this move will be contested by some participants (Bernstein 2005; Gamson 1997; Rohlinger, Klein, Stamm and Rogers 2015).

In this paper, we trace this shift from oppositional consciousness to politicized collective identity through an analysis of “identity talk.” Social movement scholar understand “identity talk” as an extension of “identity work,” which is an “interactional accomplishment that is socially constructed, interpreted, and communicated via words, deeds, and images” (Hunt and Benford 1994, 491).⁷ In other words, communication, whether it is written, verbal, or symbolic, provides a foundation for the construction and maintenance of collective identity (Gamson 1997; Hunt, Benford and Snow 1994; Snow and McAdam 2002). Identity talk is an ideal way to track how a collective identity shifts from a personal philosophy to a political mandate. Here, we analyze how the collective identity associated with one of the most popular Alt-Right forums, “The Red Pill,” became politicized and served as a base of collective action in the 2016 Presidential election.

THE RED PILL: AN INTRODUCTION

The Red Pill forum was created in October 2012 by “pk_atheist,” who was recently revealed to be the former Republican lawmaker Robert Fisher. The name of the forum is a reference to the film *The Matrix* in which the protagonist, Neo, is given a choice between slavery (the blue pill) and enlightenment (the red pill). Neo chooses the red pill and subsequently learns that the world in which he lives is designed to deceive and enslave him. Similarly, the purpose of

The Red Pill forum is to expose the “true nature” of feminism as oppressive to men, and to help men reclaim their “rightful place” in society.

The Red Pill is situated within Reddit.com, a semi-anonymous online space branded as “The Front Page of the Internet.” Unlike other Alt-Right forums, such as 4chan and Stormfront, Reddit is easy to access and has few startup costs (Phillips 2015), increasing its viability as a political rallying point. Within Reddit, there are a variety of user-created forums (called “subreddits”) where individuals can create discussion threads around topics of interest. The Red Pill is one such forum. Reddit users, who must navigate to a specific forum and thread, can add their comments and “upvote” or “downvote” a thread or post, which respectively adds or subtracts from its score (called “karma”). Karma is consequential because threads and posts with positive karma become more visible to other users, while posts with negative karma become less visible. This voting system ultimately allows popular users, which we refer to as “elite users,” to dominate conversations, while obscuring posts that challenge popular views or introduce controversial issues into a discussion. Subreddit creators and moderators can also affect the direction of conversation. They create codes of conduct for the subreddit, which allows them to ban users who violate forum norms. Additionally, they can “sticky” post content with which they agree, which makes a post constantly visible to users regardless of its karma score.

In The Red Pill subreddit, there are several categories of discussion, such as Field Reports, Men’s Rights, Rants, Fitness, and Science. The forum is structured hierarchically, and moderators respectively reward and sanction users with which they do (not) agree. Moderators, who are denoted by a special symbol next to their names, choose which users will be designated as “Red Pill elites.” While there are various levels of seniority among elites, these users are given special “flairs” next to their usernames to publicly identify their special status within the

community. In this way, moderators choose which users they think express Red Pill sentiments appropriately and publicly reward them for doing so. Moderators also punish those with whom they disagree by deleting their posts, publicly dismissing their points of view, or labeling them as “trolls” and banning them from the forum.

We analyzed two different types of discussion threads on The Red Pill subreddit: Field Reports and Men’s Rights. In Field Reports, users discuss how they employ a “Red Pill strategy” in real-world situations, and seek advice from other users on how to better act like “alpha” men (these terms are discussed in detail below). In Men’s Rights threads, users discuss topics concerning the perceived systematic oppression of men. We focused on these two threads for three related reasons. First, these threads were the most popular over time. Threads on “Fitness,” “Rants,” and “Science,” for example, generated sporadic and limited conversations among users. Second, given their popularity, these threads allowed us to track points of convergence and divergence among the opinions of forum users, the role of these (dis)agreements in developing an oppositional consciousness, and the eventual politicization of the Red Pill collective identity. Finally, these threads enable us to assess the role of moderators and elite users in politicization as well as how they responded to those with whom they did not agree.

We analyzed the four highest community-rated Field Reports and Men’s Rights posts from October 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016.⁸ We used the month of October since it was the first month in which The Red Pill had both Field Reports and Men’s Rights threads. Table 1 summarizes the topic post titles, notes who wrote the post (e.g., an elite user, moderator, or regular user), and lists the number of comments associated with each post. It is worth noting that since Reddit is a semi-anonymous forum, it is difficult to say with certainty who uses a given subreddit. According to a 2016 Pew Research Center survey, 71% of Reddit news users are men

and 59% are between the ages of 18 and 29. Pew also found that 47% of Reddit users identify as liberal, 39% as moderate, and 13% as conservative. The Red Pill skews politically conservative, meaning that forum users consistently post Alt-Right content. Martin (2017), for instance, found that The Red Pill shares many of its users with the pro-Trump forum “The_Donald.” This suggests that, at least on Reddit, there is a continuous exchange of conservative commentary between forums dedicated to mainstream Republican politics and Alt-Right meeting grounds. As discussed above, the strict regulation of the forum by users and moderators alike allows us to be almost certain that the commenters in our sample are men who are interested in The Red Pill, and not “trolls” looking to disrupt the forum’s normal operations.⁹

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

We used inductive content analysis to analyze the 1,762 comments made by forum participants. Inductive content analysis refers to the use of an open-ended coding scheme to sort data into distinct analytical categories (Cho and Lee 2014). For example, if a user bragged about recent sexual exploits in a comment, while also stating that such exploits proved their “alpha status,” we would label that comment as discussing “Sexual Virility” and “Alpha Status.” This process enabled us to quantify important categories of discourse (such as “Red Pill Theory,” “Labeling Women as Manipulative,” and “Challenging Other Users”) and systematically assess whether there were any changes in the identity talk over time. Our quantitative analysis revealed a distinct shift in discourse.¹⁰ Between 2013 and 2015, users simultaneously cultivated an oppositional consciousness towards feminism while explicitly distancing themselves from political engagement. Users agreed that efforts to change legislation in men’s favor were futile, and the best way to win the gender war was to employ a “sexual strategy” that would conquer feminism. There was an abrupt shift in 2016, as moderators and elite users celebrated the

ascendance of “alpha” male Donald Trump in the presidential race, and argued that forum participants needed to take advantage of this unique political opportunity to undercut feminists. In the remainder of the paper, we trace this shift in The Red Pill discourse over time.

OCTOBER 2013-2015: THE RED PILL AS PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

Angered by feminism’s increasing influence in modern culture, Red Pill men seek to reclaim their power in a world where “We [men] no longer run the show” (pk_atheist, 11/08/2012, “Introduction”). These men long for a past where masculinity could be performed purely through physical, economic, and sexual prowess (Kimmel 1996), and explicitly push back against feminism by establishing a “sexual strategy for men.” The purpose of this strategy is explained in an early post by the creator of The Red Pill:

Feminism is a sexual strategy. It puts women into the best position they can find, to select mates, to determine when they want to switch mates, to locate the best DNA possible, and to garner the most resources they can individually achieve. The Red Pill is men's sexual strategy. Reality is happening, and we need to make sure that we adjust our strategy accordingly. (pk_atheist, 11/08/2012, “Introduction”)

The initial focus on establishing a sexual strategy for men was consequential for two reasons. First, it focused forum users’ attention on their own personal behavior relative to women rather than politics. Elites urged men to internalize this sexual strategy and make it a “philosophy” that shaped their daily interactions with women, and many users recommend that this philosophy not be shared with others outside the forum. As noted by one popular comment:

The first rule advocated by the subreddit is, essentially, to never talk about The Red Pill in real life, and never argue the ideas anywhere but an online forum. Many on The Red Pill agree that we are best when we are a relative minority. We do not want mainstream

success because we primarily advocate individual solutions. And the individuals in this community are at their best when the vast majority of their competition is average and the outside world is not well informed on game (“HonestMaskProprietor,” 10/19/2015, Men’s Rights 2015).

Second, and related, the emphasis on feminism - rather than institutional politics or collective action - created an “empowering state of mind” or oppositional framework through which men could understand their lives (Mansbridge and Morris 2001). Popular feminism served as The Red Pill’s foil. Men projected their fear and anger on feminism and constructed a solution that put women back in their place. Throughout their conversations, adherents focused on three topics that they regarded as foundational to The Red Pill collective identity: The sexual subjugation of women, men’s personal transformation from “betas” to “alphas,” and the differences between the mainstream men’s rights movement and The Red Pill.

The first key way that forum users solidified their collective identity was through the “oppressive othering” (Schwalbe et al. 2000) of women as an inferior group. It is common for men to bond with one another and demonstrate their manhood through the public degradation of women (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009), and the process of oppressive othering allows the oppressors to feel more connected to a dominant social group (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Users bonded through the shared dehumanization of women, with many forum conversations describing women as inferior, self-centered, and manipulative, often utilizing a plethora of other slurs including “slut,” “cunt,” “bitch,” and “plates” (Red Pill’s term for sexually subservient women).¹¹ For example, one highly-rated comment on a 2015 Field Report post noted:

The greatest part is that your closest male friends will always be there for you. My Grandmother is not doing too well and I get phone calls every week from them asking

how both of us are doing. It's such an amazing feeling. No empathy from women, though. Too busy receiving validation on social media because the world revolves around vagina (foldpak111, 10/28/2015).

In an extension of this discussion, the same user described men and women by likening them to animals:

Dogs act like men, cats act like women. So basically, if you want a loyal best friend who is always going to be there for you when you're on your knees, get a dog. If you want a passive aggressive bitch who walks around like she owns the place and when you confront her, she hides for a week, get a cat. (foldpak111, 10/28/2015, 2015 Field Report)

Derogatory slurs were not the only way in which men recast the world through the patriarchal lens of the Red Pill sexual strategy. In their conversations, adherents routinely cast women as sexual playthings that men could (and should) use to demonstrate their masculine superiority. When all women are “sluts” or “plates,” it is in the Red Pill man’s best interest to use them for their only purpose (sex) and then discard them when they are no longer useful. A highly-rated comment on the 2014 Field Report demonstrates this view:

One of my most memorable nights/weeks of sex happened after I told a plate I'd be getting a drink with a woman I'd known in high school. Plate begged me to come to her place afterwards, "no matter how late." I stumbled in at 2am... She did one of those fake *yawns*, "oh, did you have fun?" I proceed to fuck the holy shit out of her. The next morning I went back to my place and banged the high school friend, who I'd yet to inform the plate was staying at my place (10/02/2014).

In the 2016 Field Report, users discussed how to seduce women at social events, and one user offered this popular comment:

And weddings are high anxiety events for women because it reminds them that they are failing in life and still riding the Cock Carousel without a man as a rock for her (unmarried girls freak out... feeling the Wall approaching). So exploit female anxiety (wedding) and amplify your freedom (I Don't Give a Fuck) and the odds are you come out a winner. (NeoreactionSafe, 10/04/2016)

In short, Red Pill men agreed that women were a (sexual) enemy, and a sexual strategy was needed to survive the “war on men.” What is disturbing about this oppositional consciousness is that Red Pill men equate the sexual exploitation or the humiliation of women with a blow to feminism and a successful performance of an “alpha” masculine identity (discussed below). We do not think that this is coincidental given the historical links of masculine performance to physical and sexual violence (Kimmel 1996).

The second key way in which Red Pill men constructed their collective identity was through discussions of their transformation from weak “beta men” to strong, virile “alpha men.” This transformation reflects men’s acceptance of a collective identity that rejects gender equity and all those in favor of it. Such stories rely heavily on details of men’s sexual exploits, demonstrating that they have moved from being “betas,” who are subservient to wives and girlfriends, to “alphas” who hookup with multiple sexual partners without romantic commitment, control women through emotional manipulation, and possess a (predominantly sexual) agentic self. These narratives are interesting because they utilize neoliberal ideologies to strengthen the collective identity of adherents (Jasper 1997; Polletta 1998). Power is achieved through independence, and such independence relies on neoliberal norms of success, in which an individual must stand on their own merit and personal improvement can be achieved through the

correct consumption habits (Harvey 2005). In this case, men consume the advice of other users, a variety of protein supplements, and a steady gym membership.

The transformation from beta to alpha is difficult, and Red Pill users utilized forum conversations as a support system throughout their journey of self-improvement. In the 2013 Field Report, elite user GayLubeOil rallied Red Pill men by arguing that men must not be afraid to selfishly take what they want, noting, “Women and betas always stand in the way of greatness. They love mediocrity... If you want to be the best, then you’re going to have to do whatever it takes to get there... even if it makes women uncomfortable” (10/28/2013). In the world of The Red Pill, men are at the mercy of a state that does not care for their existence, and must therefore use any means necessary to achieve personal happiness. These efforts are a backlash to more gender-neutral state policies (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), with Red Pill men seeking not only to reclaim traditional masculinity, but to also transform modern understandings of gender to suit their own needs. The achievement of “alpha” status thus reflects one’s complete embodiment of neoliberal masculine norms, with personal fulfillment being far more valuable than group-welfare.

To further establish themselves as a unique collective, Red Pill users distanced the forum from “traditional” men’s rights groups, which were regarded as both insufficiently critical of feminism and too focused on political action. Users often framed these groups as inferior to The Red Pill because they embraced ideas of gender equity in their pursuit of political goals (such as father’s rights and alimony reform) instead of focusing on personal improvement. Over time, Red Pillers began to label traditional men’s rights groups as “The male equivalent of feminism” (Sadpanda596, 10/19/2015, Men’s Rights 2015). A highly praised comment demonstrates this view:

I frequent the MensRights subreddit and sadly it has devolved into one giant circle jerk complaining about female child molesters and shit feminists say on Facebook. Too often they're trying to win the "oppression Olympics" against third wave feminists and in doing so they're actually emasculating men and turning them into women. I think there are a lot of men's issues that need to be addressed (e.g. male suicide, biased divorce courts, etc.), but doing from the same worldview as feminism is a fool's game because nobody is going to care about male "oppression" (jb_trp, 10/19/2015, Men's Rights 2015).

Red Pill elite "GayLubeOil," who made the 2015 Men's Rights post, offered this comment on the aptitude of traditional men's rights activists:

So to all of the men's rights activists that got trolled into reading this article, do us all a favor and stop being a chubster, speak with confidence and for the love of pregnant Men's Rights Activist Jesus go lift. Your body is the message. The sooner you start taking your appearance seriously the sooner you will be taken seriously. Who knows maybe you guys can help make marriage a viable institution again or bring back free speech to university campuses. We The Red Pill are standing right behind you, getting our dicks sucked by insecure sorority girls and calling you fat (10/19/2015, 2015 Men's Rights Post).

The Red Pill was often likened to a club of elite men who had figured out how to beat their competition in the masculinity game, and to these men, political action was futile in comparison to personal improvement and sexual conquest. This understanding of The Red Pill as a personal philosophy that needed to be hid from the broader public in part reflects the concern of stigmatization. White Supremacists, for instance, often hide their affiliation with hateful communities to protect themselves from criticism (Blee 2002). However, it also allowed forum

users to emphasize their personal transformations from “beta” to “alpha” men in a “safe space,” in a twisted inversion of feminist safe spaces that promise protection and empowerment for users (Rosemary Clark-Parson 2017).

In sum, Red Pill men utilized their oppositional consciousness to redefine understandings of manhood and patriarchal authority. Users engaged with the forum to create a philosophy of “sexual strategy” that cultivated The Red Pill collective identity as a pro-male force against feminism and its proponents, while rejecting political mobilization. Moderators and elite users argued that the political action of traditional men’s rights groups was less fulfilling than the goal of personal improvement, and the community agreed. In other words, the welfare of all men was far less important than the satisfaction of Red Pill men. This sentiment would change as Trump ascended within the Republican Party. Elite users utilized Trump’s platform, and their clout in the forum, to push the community towards mainstream political engagement.

OCTOBER 2016: POLITICIZING THE RED PILL IDENTITY

Identity talk on The Red Pill forum shifted dramatically after Donald Trump became the official candidate of the Republican Party. Moderators and elite users did an abrupt about-face on their views of political action. In fact, moderators and elite users quickly positioned Trump’s candidacy as an opportunity to push back politically against feminism and destroy Hillary Clinton, whom they regarded as the epitome of everything wrong with feminists. As we outlined above, The Red Pill forum had a collective identity and a common enemy, meaning that the forum leadership only needed to convince adherents that involvement in institutional politics would help them strike a serious blow against feminism (Simon and Grabow 2010; Simon and Klandermans 2001).

To do so, moderators and elite users had to move adherents beyond a focus on feminism and their personal opposition to it, and contextualize the importance of political action - in this case, voting - relative to a larger polity. They did this by framing the presidential election in the context of a political “war on men,” specifically focusing on the threat Hillary Clinton posed to The Red Pill community and exalting Donald Trump as an “alpha” male who would fight for men’s political fortune. Forum leaders were careful to link political action to The Red Pill’s sexual strategy, and argue that the 2016 presidential election represented a unique opportunity to forward the forum’s ideological agenda.

Moderators and elite users pit Clinton and Trump against one another ideologically and argued that Clinton would exacerbate the “war on men.” The top Men’s Right’s post of October 2016, entitled “‘Sexual Assault’ is Why I’m Endorsing Donald Trump for President of the United States,” was created as a call to action against this political development. In this post, moderator “redpillschool” explains that this war on men “is not abating as many have suggested over the last few years. It’s growing, and it’s growing out of control.” He takes care to note that while the forum is normally “politics neutral,” the 2016 election represents a key political opportunity for Red Pill users, one that could make or break their ability to pushback against feminism. He explained:

This election season we’re not going to be able to put up any walls between sexual strategy and politics, because the outcomes from these candidates are directly tied to the very cultural influences and trends we’ve been discussing here for the past few years. They’re tied to sexual strategy.... Our presidential candidates are representing a system set up to increasingly damage the lives of men (and promote the choices, advantages, and

positive outcomes for women) and those alienated by this system, respectively (10/14/2016, Men's Rights 2016).

Hillary Clinton, in short, was the avatar of a feminist, anti-male establishment.

Redpillschool's call to action received immediate positive attention from the community, and notably, from other elite users. Another moderator, "bsutansalt," quickly "stickied" a reply to the post, in which he agreed with redpillschool and offered additional reasons why Red Pill men should vote for Trump. Bsutansalt linked to a video made by Trump campaign associate David Clarke, in which Clarke criticized an oppressive "leftist media" for being afraid of the Trump campaign's violent rhetoric. Bsutansalt argued that this message was one that Red Pillers "need to see at least once in their lives," alluding that the "leftists" that Clarke mentioned were also enemies of The Red Pill. Bsutansalt further suggested that Trump personified their sexual strategy, noting:

Young HOT women LOVE The Donald, but it's the older, jaded, washed up feminist types who seem to have a problem. Think about why that is for a moment you'll see exactly why this is TRP-related. (10/14/2016, Men's Rights)

Bsutansalt was not the only elite to speak on Trump's behalf. GayLubeOil, the elite user who argued against political action just one year earlier, also pushed Red Pill men to vote Trump and argued with users who would not endorse him.

Most Red Pill men posting on the forum were easily politicized. Forum users described a Hillary Clinton presidency as cataclysmically emasculating insofar as it would irreversibly entrench feminism into American politics. This prospect inspired anger and fear in Red Pill users, with one user even arguing that Hillary's victory would "give the free card to all women in the nation to be complete deplorable corrupt whores" ("VitaminPower," 10/14/2016, Men's

Rights 2016). Among these users, political support for Trump was a natural extension of The Red Pill personal philosophy. As “ECoast_Man” noted:

I would actually argue that it is incompatible to adhere to The Red Pill and support Hillary Clinton’s bid for presidency. You can not support Trump but there is no way to be a Hillary Rodham Clinton supporter. RedPillSchool is absolutely right to bring this up, we’ve been talking about this here for years (10/14/2016, Men’s Rights 2016).

Another user argued that men would live in fear if Trump lost the election:

RedPillSchool is exactly right. They [the media] are trying to make what Trump said/did into "sexual assault." If they succeed then no man will be safe anywhere, anytime. There will be paralyzing fear in all men at the mere thought of approaching a woman. Only true "Alphas" will have the confidence to approach women and it won't matter. They can be brought down decades later if they were too forward or if they talked trash on a blog.

(“Bluepillprofessor,” 10/14/2016, Men’s Rights 2016)

In short, the sexual strategy of The Red Pill served as a foundation for politicizing the collective identity of forum users, with elite users transforming this oppositional consciousness into a political stance. As one user summarized, “This war on masculinity has gone on for far too long, and our only hope of stopping it right now is Donald Trump” (“Oxykitten80mg,” 10/14/2016, Men’s Rights 2016).

It is important to underscore that The Red Pill’s political pivot was contentious, with some users challenging this new commitment to politics and Donald Trump. One highly-rated comment derided pro-Trump users, stating: “Y’all falling for the cult of personality. Dumb fucks” (“Darkwoodz,” 10/14/2016, Men’s Rights 2016). Another user agreed, commenting:

[Trump's] not a Red Pill hero. He's an idiot, he's a sexual pervert, he has huge insecurities, and is as eloquent as a bag of dog shit. Oh, and he's known for being a deal maker his entire life. Lol he IS the system. Stop confusing being stupid for being alpha. Stop confusing rudeness with boldness. Stop confusing his lack of eloquence for straight talk ("logicalthinker1," 10/14/2016, Men's Rights 2016).

For some, Trump did not adequately represent Red Pill ideology, and was simply another representation of the political establishment that would hurt The Red Pill. These challenges were largely unsuccessful. The most popular anti-Trump comment received less than half the karma than the most popular pro-Trump comment received, and most anti-Trump comment threads had very low comment scores. Trump haters were publicly called out and labeled as "shills" for pro-Hillary public relations firms and, in some cases, had their "alpha" male status questioned. The implication here is that anti-Trump sentiment could never come from a "true" Red Pill man, and that any push against politicization came from outside the forum. Forum leaders redrew the boundaries regarding who did - and did not - constitute legitimate members of the forum to encourage users to fall in line with the new political focus (Bernstein 2005; Gamson 1997; Rohlinger and Bunnage 2017).

Many pro-Trump users explicitly linked Trump's masculinity performances to the alpha identity, with his financial and sexual prowess making him emblematic of Red Pill manhood. As one popular comment stated:

Trump might be one of our last hopes to overthrow the current system and banish the liars forever. More importantly he's the embodiment of everything masculine. Trump becoming president in the United States means the West will eventually reflect him. We

are taking our manhood back. No more slaves. Freedom for all (“PantsonFire1234,” 10/14/2016, Men’s Rights 2016).

Another user described Trump’s embodiment of Red Pill values:

[The media] Criticizing him for being a billionaire womanizer is just absurd. I would be shocked and a bit concerned if he didn’t use his status in society on women (who, let’s be honest, were probably all over him when this “assault” happened). Trump embodies Red Pill thinking into every fiber of his being. It’s important that we support him (“redpillnexus,” 10/14/2016, Men’s Rights 2016).

As The Red Pill longs for “traditional masculinity” that prides men on sexual prowess, physical aggression, and economic success (Kimmel 1996), Trump’s “true man” persona makes him emblematic of Red Pill ideals. Attacks on Trump were thus criticisms of The Red Pill identity, and these attacks were attributed to feminists and the “leftist media,” further aligning The Red Pill community with Trump through their common enemies. It did not hurt that Trump’s idealization of himself as a “self-made” entrepreneur closely fits neoliberal idealizations of success, which further convinced Red Pill adherents that Trump was the kind of “alpha” who would whip America into shape.

In sum, elites politicized The Red Pill identity by linking community ideals of neoliberal “alpha masculinity” to Trump’s public image as a powerful, independent dealmaker, and then framed the electoral conflict as one between alpha masculinity and the “feminist establishment.” Elite users then pushed adherents to engage in anonymous political action - voting for a “Red Pill savior.” The gendered philosophy of sexual strategy was merged with the gendered political action of voting for an aggressively misogynistic and traditionally masculine candidate. Trump’s rapid ascension allowed The Red Pill to produce change in accordance with the concept of

gendered opportunity structures (McCammon et al 2001.) Trump’s polarizing effect on the political environment, in that he caused hypermasculinity, blatant misogyny, and violent “tough talk” to resurge in popularity on the national stage, provided the perfect opportunity for Red Pill men to combat feminism through political action. When users attempted to resist this politicization, their credentials as “true” Red Pill men were diminished by elite users. With betas described as supporting Hillary, the only action suitable for alphas was to vote for Donald Trump, who in the eyes of many users, would make America “manly” again.

THE FUTURE OF POLITICIZED SEMI-ANONYMOUS SPACES

In the wake of Donald Trump’s victory, many scholars were left wondering how this extremist right-wing candidate was able to secure the most venerated position in U.S politics. We investigated the inner-workings of The Red Pill to glean some insight into where (and how) some of Trump’s most fervent supporters were mobilized on election day. During the Obama-era, envisioning such political efficacy from forums like The Red Pill seemed ludicrous. Even social scientists would have been reticent to say that semi-anonymous forums cultivated communities that could mobilize effective political change (Beyer 2014; Caren, Jowers and Gaby 2012; Futrell and Simi 2004).

The case of The Red Pill shows the political viability of semi-anonymous online communities within networks of contention. Men were drawn to The Red Pill identity as a “safe” method of enhancing personal strength and sexual gratification. Their journey toward “enlightenment” was shepherded by elite users, who used neoliberal cultural messages to construct The Red Pill as a personal philosophy in a patriarchal resistance to feminism. Moderators and users cultivated their patriarchal resistance to feminism outside the view of the broader public until Donald Trump, who espoused his own disdain toward women (among other

groups), emerged as the Republican presidential candidate. Moderators and elite users quickly used their authority to rally forum adherents to action, successfully overcoming years of political reticence by linking adherents' understanding of manhood to Trump's neoliberal public image as a "self-made billionaire." Appeals to the Red Pill sexual strategy as a collective identity and the threat of a Clinton presidency, which represented the potential entrenchment of feminism in American politics, were crucial to galvanizing this engagement.

There is good news and bad news for feminist scholars. The good news is that while The Red Pill became politically engaged after years of disengagement, the ability of elite users to use the forum for continued collective action appears to be limited. As far as we know, users were simply encouraged to support Trump, and those who had doubts about him were persuaded by the community to be "on their side." Users were not compelled to engage in any other political action - not even routine actions such as donating money to Trump's campaign, phone-banking, or political canvassing. To be clear, Red Pill men may have done these actions on their own and not revealed them to the forum. The point here is that the initial conceptualization of The Red Pill as a personal philosophy limits how this collective identity can be used to foster political engagement, and public stigmatization hampers what forum elites can ask adherents to do, especially through the constraints of a semi-anonymous online forum. In other words, politicization of the Red Pill identity seems to be relatively short lived, and it is unlikely that many men wish to publicly identify with the misogyny expressed in this forum, even in the wake of Trump's victory.

The bad news is that even though this politicization was short lived, it was effective (Martin 2017). While the politicization of the forum was contested, moderators and elite users were able to quell dissent in the short term and link the Red Pill identity with voting for Donald

Trump. This clearly demonstrates that these extreme online enclaves can be dominated by a few powerful voices, which can help candidates holding distasteful views get elected. While we do not wish to argue that The Red Pill's mobilization was the tipping point for Trump's electoral success, we present this data to illustrate generalized processes of mobilization that may have occurred throughout the Internet in the buildup to the 2016 election. This has implications for further studies of semi-anonymous online spaces that rely on community voting to determine user experiences, and unfortunately for feminists, indicates that extreme misogynistic discourse can successfully create political action in the modern age.

It remains to be seen how The Red Pill community will continue to engage with American politics. Their success could arguably have a stifling effect on future involvement, as some users may see the "war on men" abated with Trump as President. Demobilization in the wake of victory is common in social movements (Rohlinger 2015). However, it is possible that this success has drawn in enough new adherents, ones who are willing to be extreme and push back against "political correctness" publicly. This is particularly true given Trump's public support for white nationalists and affiliations with Alt-Right sweethearts such as Stephen Bannon. The growth of the community in the wake of Trump's political ascendance as well as the development of affiliated communities such as "Red Pill Right" (an explicitly Alt-Right political space for Red Pill users), "Red Pill Women" and "Red Pill Parenting," suggests that the willingness of citizens to act on misogynistic philosophies is growing. In other words, The Red Pill could function as a politically awakened network of Alt-Right activism, and feminists should monitor the development of these new communities, how they interact with other Alt-Right spaces, and how community involvement fosters an Alt-Right collective identity and "lifestyle." It is possible that a lack of knowledge about the Alt-Right's dark corner of the Internet has

blinded scholars from the current demographics of the of U.S polity, primarily, the influence of its angry, young, White men. It is too easy to write off these men as Internet trolls who are unwilling to engage with the real world. But on November 8th, 2016, they made their political agenda known, and they will undoubtedly attempt to do so again.

Feminist groups should be alarmed at this rapidly growing Alt-Right online presence, and need to find ways to undermine these extreme communities. It is likely that a “shadow network” (Frickel, Torcasso and Anderson 2015) of Alt-Right activism exists between various Reddit forums and other extremist political spaces, such as StormFront, segments of 4chan, and online forums potentially unknown to scholars. If this is true, elite users on one forum can utilize their capital within multiple online spaces, bolstering the global Right’s organizational capabilities. We must focus on the mechanisms through which communities like The Red Pill create political engagement, such as using emotional identity talk, relying on charismatic leaders, and developing “personal philosophies” that can be linked to collective action. Understanding these processes will help us combat (and hopefully prevent) the election of the next misogynistic populist.

Additionally, as feminists, we must address the social and political processes that allowed these hateful communities to crawl out of the shadows. Our influence in modern political institutions is already waning, as we further transition into a “postfeminist” culture where feminist concerns and politics are considered unnecessary and even harmful to women’s success (Hall and Rodriguez 2003; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005; Taylor 1989). This is reflected in an increasingly vile and misogynistic Internet culture in which women are attacked for merely existing (Jane 2014, 2016; Sobieraj 2017). We must ensure that these communities do not dominate online discussions, and halt the tide of post-feminist discourse. The Women’s March

demonstrated that feminists are not alone in this fight against extremism. It is critical for us to find ways to create our own networks and reproduce this success online.

ENDNOTES

1. As Banet-Wieser and Miltner (2016) note, the Alt-Right conflates an attack on the construction of masculinity with an attack on maleness.
2. See, for example, Jordan (2016), Futrell and Simi (2004), Messner (1998), and Salter (2016).
3. Shit-posting refers to the practice when individuals post negative content in an online forum (such as Reddit) or a social media network (such as Twitter). One purpose of shit-posting is to derail or take over a discussion. Trump supporters shit-posted his opponents by creating memes and, in some cases, billboards emphasizing their potential weaknesses.

4. See, for example, Blee (2002), Ferber (2000), McCammon et al. (2001), Marshall (1985), and Sobieraj (2017).
5. The cultivation of oppositional consciousness and the creation of collective identity are interrelated processes, which are difficult to parse out from one another (see Mansbridge and Morris 2001). Consequently, we do not separate the processes here, but focus on how these sometimes mutually reinforcing processes play out in an online forum. Future scholarship should consider the empirical differences between these processes and how it affects political action.
6. It is worth noting that we diverge from social scientists in our usage of gendered opportunities, which typically is used to explain when and how women can challenge the male status quo and forward women's rights and representation (Beckwith 1996; McCammon et al. 2001).
7. For an overview of identity work and its relevance to collective identity and social movements see Snow and McAdam (2000). For examples of research that analyzes the construction of identity see Blee and Creasap (2010), Hunt and Benford (1994), and Ghaziani (2011).
8. We used a third-party website, Reddit Time Machine, to determine the most popular posts from October each year.
9. There is, however, a forum for "Red Pill Women," where women can discuss how to support their "alpha" men and live a Red Pill lifestyle.
10. Quantitative content analysis also was used to count the presence of different frames over time. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to present these results, these counts were used to confirm The Red Pill's transformation.

11. Given the offensive nature of posts on The Red Pill regarding the sexual exploitation and humiliation of women, we limit our examples in this section.

Table 1. Most Popular October Posts by Topic, 2013-2016

Year	Topic Posts	Title	Post Creator and Community Status	Karma	Number of Comments on Post
<i>2013</i>	Field Report	What Bodybuilding Taught Me About Cultural Marxism	GayLubeOil (Elite User)	125	89
	Men's Rights	Fewer Men Graduate College: Obama says it's a "Great Accomplishment"	Bsutansalt (Moderator)	153	90
<i>2014</i>	Field Report	Dread Game in Action	Summertime_Dimes (Regular User)	314	100
	Men's Rights	TIL just deleted a post about male victims of domestic abuse	Aerobus (Moderator)	1217	219
<i>2015</i>	Field Report	Keep your feelings to yourself, and especially away from women	Pronobis21 (Regular User)	340	148
	Men's Rights	A Message to Men's Rights from Red Pill	GayLubeOil (Elite User)	605	375
<i>2016</i>	Field Report	Going to an event where you don't know anyone	Bulk_king11 (Regular User)	1041	123
	Men's Rights	"Sexual Assault" is Why I'm Endorsing Donald Trump for President of the United States	Redpillschool (Moderator)	971	618
Total Number of Comments: 1762					

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