

Empirical Enmity

Equality IS coming

The last century has predominantly been a social move towards inclusion in politics and social matters, though any just equilibrium is yet to be reached. As both women and people of colour were allowed to participate in decision and policy-making, actual democracy has been well on its way to a full establishment. The last decade has further seen an uptake in both feminist, egalitarian, cultural and racial awareness, leading to several digital movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #Metoo, #Sayhername, #Consent, #YesAllWomen, #ArabSpring, and #LoveWins. The digitization of activism (often referred to simply as 'hashtag activism'), has in turn furthered a counter-movement of likewise digital counter-activism.

Most movements birth an opposition - a counter-movement. Often, this is merely a reactionary disagreement and thus a justified and democratic difference of opinion. This difference of opinion can though be voiced in such violent and aggressive terms, that it motivates not a counter-argument, but that the opponent leaves the discussion or arena. Especially in digital discussions, the actual or experienced anonymity and distance to the recipient can further an abrasive discussion format, which in turn can push some participants away from current and further discussions. As such, the violent and aggressive disagreement stops being democratic. Furthermore, some movements evolve to "proactive activism", and seek to stop or hinder the democratic premise of some groups or minorities' participation in the debate. In either combatting basic democratic premises of just representation or unbiased discussions, or actively harassing the opposition until it submits or quits, some groups have taken to the digital sphere to commit this anti-democratic violence.

Communities promoting and fighting for a male-centric and male-controlled social paradigm are referred to as 'The Manosphere'.

The Manosphere is made up of several different factions with different focal points, though all are conjoined by two simple ideas: 1) That men are inherently better suited to lead, design and

manage society than women, and 2) That feminism is a destructive ideology that seeks to subvert fact no. 1.

As such, The Manosphere is an anti-feminist and male-centric movement, based on a primarily digital presence in which it uses anti-democratic or illegal tactics to further a society 'like in the good old days', where women were beholden to men, and where the man's authority was given in the fact that he was a (white) man¹. This specific view of society is neither new nor timely unique, but has taken to a new level with the increase in digitization of the past decade, where likeminded individuals can bond together across borders and time zones; ironically the same factors that have allowed the progressive hashtag activism to grow, has given rise to its antecedent².

Several research papers and articles published in the last years, have outlined how especially digital democracy is seeing a growing attack on women's, and especially feminist, views and opinions. This in turn leads to women and feminists leaving the online democratic debate, as in the report: *Hadefulde Ytringer I Den Offentlige Debat (Hatespeech In the Public Debate)*³, in the new analysis *Annotating Online Misogyny*⁴, *The Angry Internet*⁵ or many other publications.

When surveying and observing discussion boards and chat forums from the manosphere, most authors agree on a reactionary basis for most users' participation. Kimmel (2013) points out that many of the users are younger men, that feel the world no longer has any space or use for them, and that the power structures their fathers and grandfathers had described and promised them, no longer exist (thanks to progressive politics and feminism). This disruption when coupled with a less-than-optimal wellbeing, risks leading to an explosive community where the men in turn spend less time discussing their new role in a new society, but rather in combating this evolution⁶.

Many of the factions with the greater manosphere, actively target young men, and use a strong social media presence on sites like Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and more to engage and initiate a social contact with potentially new members⁷. Herein the proponents of the manosphere pitch the anti-progressive movement as a sweetened nostalgia, advocating a romantic man-dominated

¹ Gotell & Dutton, 2016

² Kimmel, 2013. Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017.

³ Zuleta & Burkal, Institute for Human Rights, Denmark, 2017

⁴ Zeynert, Philine & Derczynski, ITU 2021

⁵ Mogensen & Rand, Center for Digital Youth Care, 2020

⁶ Mogensen & Rand, 2020.

⁷ Carissimo 2017.

space “like in the good old days”⁸. The active engagement and targeting of a younger even pre-political audience, is evidenced by the aggressive use of memes and influencer-based low-threshold marketing⁹.

Conclusively one can note, that the overall shift towards a more equal and just society is underway, this progressive change is provoking a small yet increasingly organised counter-culture. As the equal society takes form, the self-proclaimed resistance movement is mobilised.

⁸ Nagle 2017.

⁹ Decook, 2018.

A Culture of Hate (for some)

A growing body of evidence and data suggests that while men and women are subject to equal (if not even a slightly higher level for men) measures of hateful comments online¹⁰, but when regarding outright attacks¹¹ or repeated harassment¹² women by far outweigh men in the statistics. Furthermore, recent years have shown that women who participate or even hold power in public debates, be it either as policymakers, journalists, researchers, academics or such, are targeted even more so than their non-public peers.

The European Commission has suggested the following definition of *gender based online violence*: *Gender based online violence is an umbrella term used to describe all sorts of illegal or harmful behaviours against women in the online space. They can be linked to experiences of violence in real life or be limited to the online environment only. They can include illegal threats, stalking or incitement to violence, unwanted, offensive or sexually explicit emails or messages, sharing of private images or videos without consent, or inappropriate advances on social networking sites.*¹³

Thomas et. al. suggests 7 different sub-categories of online abuse¹⁴, separating toxic content, content leakage, overloading, false reporting, impersonation, surveillance, and lock-out-and-control. In the present paper, the definitions of overloading:

“When an attacker forces a target to triage hundreds of notifications or comments via amplification, or otherwise makes it technically infeasible for the target to participate online due to jamming a channel.”)

and toxic content:

¹⁰ The State of Online Harassment, Pew Research Center, 2021

¹¹ Cyberbullying, conflict management or just messing? Teenage girls' understanding and experiences of gender, friendship, and conflict on Facebook in an Irish second-level school, Ging D and Norman JO, 2016.

¹² Violence against women: an EU-wide survey, European Union / Direct, 2014

¹³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-based-violence/what-gender-based-violence_en

¹⁴ SoK: Hate, Harassment, and the Changing Landscape of Online Abuse, Thomas et. al., 2021

“Attacks involving media sent to a target or audience without the necessity of more advanced capabilities, including bullying, trolling, threats of violence and sexual harassment.”

will be used.

Danish agency, Analyse og Tal, conducted a large scale data analysis of hate filled or harassing comments on the Facebook-pages of Danish politicians¹⁵. Herein they found, that the by far most targeted group (37,8%) in the debate was Muslims, and other immigrants. The next most exposed group were women, who were targeted in 13,7% of the cases. -Comparatively, men were only targeted 1/10 of that, with 1,3%.

The same research finds that especially on Facebook, right-wing politicians are responsible for hosting a disproportionately large amount of the hate and harassment. Furthermore, it is shown that the hate and harassment most often are directed away from the right-wing politicians housing it, towards immigrant, feminists and criminals. As opposed to the few left-wing politicians also scoring high in hosting hate and harassment; here it is more directed at themselves (especially if they are immigrants or feminists).

A 2016 Inter-Parliamentary study found 82% of female parliamentarians had experienced forms of harassment or hate speech, mainly through social media. The biggest part of the harassment was sexist behaviour or violence targeted at dissuading them from continuing or participating in politics, and the second-largest were threats of rape, murder or violence¹⁶. Especially women are of risk to effectively step-back from democratic or professional engagement, as a result of such threats, as evidenced by several studies^{17 18}.

Amnesty International writes in their Toxic Twitter-project:

“For many women, the inability to fully participate and express themselves equally online means that they are absent from public conversations they would like to be part of, and sometimes, need to

¹⁵ Angreb i den offentlige debat [attacks in the public debate], Analyse og Tal, 2021.

¹⁶ Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians, Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016.

¹⁷ Finland's women-led government targeted by online harassment, Leonie Cate, Politico 2021.

¹⁸ The State of Online Harassment, Pew Research Center, 2021

be part of. To not engage or comment on an issue out of fear of violence and abuse means that certain women's voices are not represented on Twitter and that women are no longer part of the debate. For women in the public eye, in particular, this can have a detrimental effect on their career and building networks. The silencing effect of online abuse on women, including on Twitter, may also send a worrying message to younger generations that women's voices are not welcome.”¹⁹

It is therefore imperative to not only understand gendered attacks and harassment as an issue for the target itself, but also for the demographic groups that the target represents. As a public woman, person of colour, or LGBTQ+ person is targeted, their audience will witness the harassment, and thus the violence and its demotivational aspects are multiplied.

¹⁹ Toxic Twitter, Amnesty International, Chapter 5.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-5/>

Who? -Why men?

Many digital environments outside of the most mainstream platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok) men use online platforms quantitatively more, and to a higher degree to form new relationships, or enter new communities (whereas women often use them to strengthen existing ones). Men, and male-focused communities, have a higher propensity for radicalization in this regard, and as shall later be argued in this paper, will become so in lieu of formulating counter-cultures to provide (digital) places of belonging for men experiencing feelings of social ostracization. In later years, as progressive politics in regards to primarily women and immigration has become the narrative of most countries, these male communities have formulated counter-narratives of being resistance movements, masculine bulwarks against feministic oppression etc. The notion of (white) masculine values and traits being inherently better than feminine counterparts, and feminism therefore being an unnatural and unhealthy societal “coup”, eventually leading to society’s downfall. Most new radicalising groups fall under this broad understanding of gender (and race) relations, and are joined under the umbrella term: “The Manosphere”.

The Manosphere

In general these groups become attractive to young vulnerable men as they offer simple solutions to complex problems in life. ‘The Manosphere’ is a term used to denote all aggressive and democratically and socially destructive movements that start from a perspective of wanting to help or understand men, but in trying to do so, end up harming women and egalitarian work, and thus society.

As the mainstreamification and general increase in egalitarian movements has transitioned the digital veil and is predominantly focusing on hashtag-activism and digital platforms as their arenas, so has the anti-egalitarian and socially regressive counter-cultures. Whilst #Metoo, #Sayhername, #Consent, #Lovewins and more has brought about actual social change via original digital media activism, a large amount of pushback and anatomization of the same movements is also done online. This counter-activism focuses on men’s rights, male social disadvantage and how these new movements and values are to blame.

‘The Manosphere’ is the umbrella term encompassing all of the movements that believe men and male society is inherently better and more valuable than the female counterpart, and should

therefore lead, decide and police the furthering of society, and that feminism is a social insurgency seeking to uproot and combat this natural right of man.

The Manosphere has no central administration or physical offices, but is rather a loose term for all the different extreme pro-men cultures that adhere to the two distinct beliefs: Gender Essentialism (Men are inherently better than women), and Anti-Feminism (...which feminists seek to combat, wherefore men need to combat feminists).

The groups within the broad manospheric scope are (amongst others):

- Mens Rights Activists (MRA), who believe that society is disadvantaging men by establishing pro-women laws and decisions.
- Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), who believe that society has been feministically taken over, and men therefore need to exit society to see it collapse, after which they can move back in, and re-establish a patriarchal society (again).
- Pick-Up Artists (PUA), who think that the sexual liberation through feminism has caused women to have too much decision power over sexual partners, and they therefore need to be 'tricked' into giving sex to the PUAs.
- Ultra-Conservatives/Nationalists, who believe that the feminist movement has eroded the value of men as protectors, which in turn has opened the border for strong foreign men to immigrate and overtake women and jobs, and that the local men therefore need to stop feminism to stop aggressive immigration.

and,

- Involuntary Celibates (Incels), who believe that feminism has given women so much power to decide sexual partners, that all women choose to partner with the same few men, and thus need to be culled and fought back into a submissive societal and sexual position.

The Manosphere is a digital movement and (collection of) communities, even though the sentiments it shares across the different factions, are as old as the progressive movement they seek to combat. The unique aspects of The Manosphere are based around the decentralised and un-led profile of the different factions, and many users see themselves over time shift between identifying most strongly with one faction to another; e.g. the MRA movement, which most often focuses on topics like legislation and policy detracting (in their perspective) from men's rights, or unfairly given women more rights and privilege, to a more militaristic and alt-right orientation ,

which can further the same goals (rectifying the patriarchal role of the strong leader-man, in opposition to women and foreign influences), but seeks to employ different (more modern, digital) toolsets to do so.

Promoted Animosity

The past decade has seen an increase in social arenas moving to a digital sphere, either as an extension of the physical arena, or as a substitution thereof. People are increasingly engaging with each other via digital media, and with politics and politicians.

Many digital social arenas offer a level of anonymity, either via self-elected usernames (Twitter, Reddit, Instagram), no usernames at all (4Chan, 8Kun), or non-descript, restricted, private or otherwise “closed” user-to-user interfaces (or the option for such), like Facebook. This has caused some researchers to argue that the level of animosity must increase on digital platforms, as the societal contract of socially acceptable behavior is weakened as the person-to-person interaction is monitored by social arenas (such as classrooms, offices etc.) is rather substituted by user-to-user interactions, often only monitored by moderators on the respective platforms.

Some researchers argue that the social learning taught by the simple feedback system consisting of likes, comments, retweets and shares, motivates users to write in abrasive and “loud”, rather than dialogical, terms²⁰. On social media platforms, the cognitive and timewise “cheapest” feedback is positive in nature - the like. This simple digital gesture, be it an upturned thumb (Facebook) or a heart (Twitter), is the easiest way of engaging with a post or comment, as it only requires a click with a mouse, or short press of a finger. Disagreements require the opposition to write a full counter-argument (or at the very least express their disagreement in a comment), or voice their concern with premises or conclusions in the original post - a cognitively more “expensive” gesture, compared to the simple click/press for a positive feedback. Thus, many disagreeing users simply abstain from positively reaffirming statements they dislike, and as such only voice a tacit dissent, which inherently is invisible for the original poster.

Social media platforms furthermore push users towards content that they expect will cause them to “engage”. Facebook, which is by far the biggest purveyor of digital social interactions with more than 2 billion active users, changed its algorithm for promotion and accentuation of content in 2018, to a more engage-provoking setup²¹. This was done as a restructuring to encourage users to engage with each other on the platform (via comments, shares and debates), and not just watch

²⁰ How social learning amplifies moral outrage expression in online social networks. Brady, W, et. al. (2021)

²¹ <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/01/news-feed-fyi-bringing-people-closer-together/>

videos and just inactively “spend time” on the platform, as per (then) VP Adam Mosseri: *“We think that we’re currently slightly overvaluing how much time people spend on our platform and undervaluing how many meaningful interactions they have with other people.”* The Meaningful Social Interactions (MSI) update has succeeded insofar as to promote more content that the platform’s users are engaging with - unfortunately, much of this content is based off of social outrage, as this is very engaging in nature. Very much moreso than innocuous content.

As such, content concerning topics like immigration, feminism, crime, COVID-19, and other polarizing subjects, are promoted to the forefront of the newsfeed, because the algorithm recognizes their users’ motivation to “engage” with it.

Danish big data analysis agency, Analyse & Tal, proves that the most engaging topics on social media, are also often the most aggressive²². Particularly topics concerning safety, political orientation, immigration, crime, law, ethnicity, equality, feminism and “Danishness” have a higher concentration of hate and attack-content, compared to low-scorers such as pets, vacations, litterature and pregnancy.

As such, the politicized topics that most social media users find engaging, are the same topics that are promoted by the platforms, and furthermore, are the same that inspire hateful and aggressive rhetoric.

The statements by former Facebook employee, Frances Haugen, in the fall of 2021, has increased attention to the question of whether Facebook and other platforms are aware of the aggressive bias in the debate promoted by their algorithms.

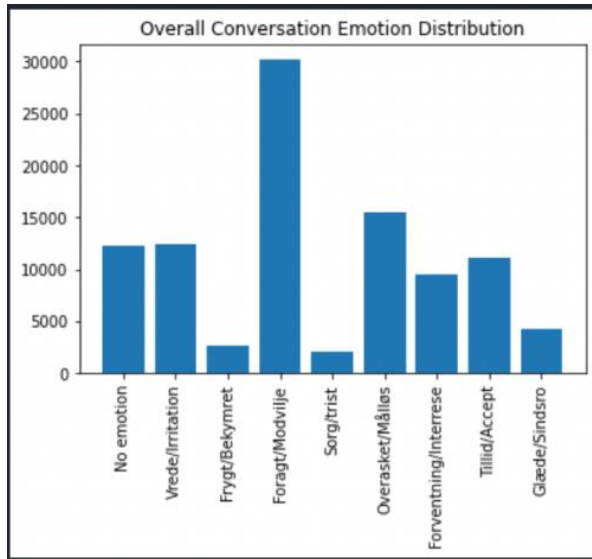
“The thing I saw over and over again was that there were conflicts of interest between what was good for the public and what was good for Facebook. [...] Facebook over and over again chose to optimize for its own interests, like making more money.”

This research supports the notion that social media, with algorithms and “engaging” design, motivates an aggressive and confrontational level of debate.

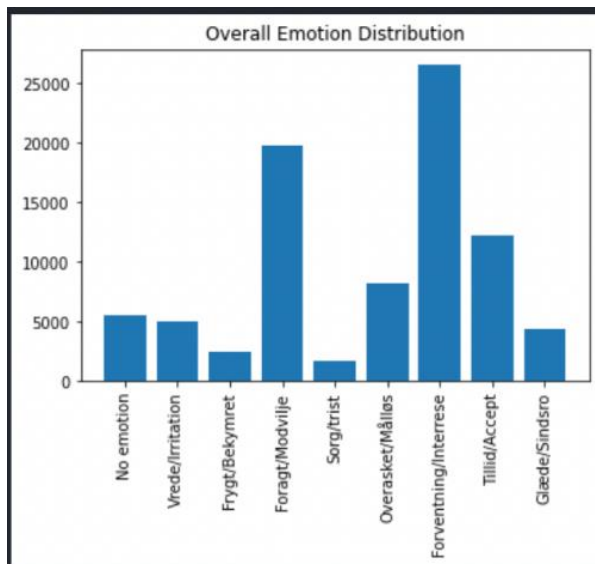
²² Angreb i den offentlige debat på Facebook, Analyse & Tal (2021)

Our own analysis show that (Danish) politicians use a noticeably higher level of Anger/Irritability-language when responding to other political content, compared to when they post an original tweet.

In conversations:



In original tweets:



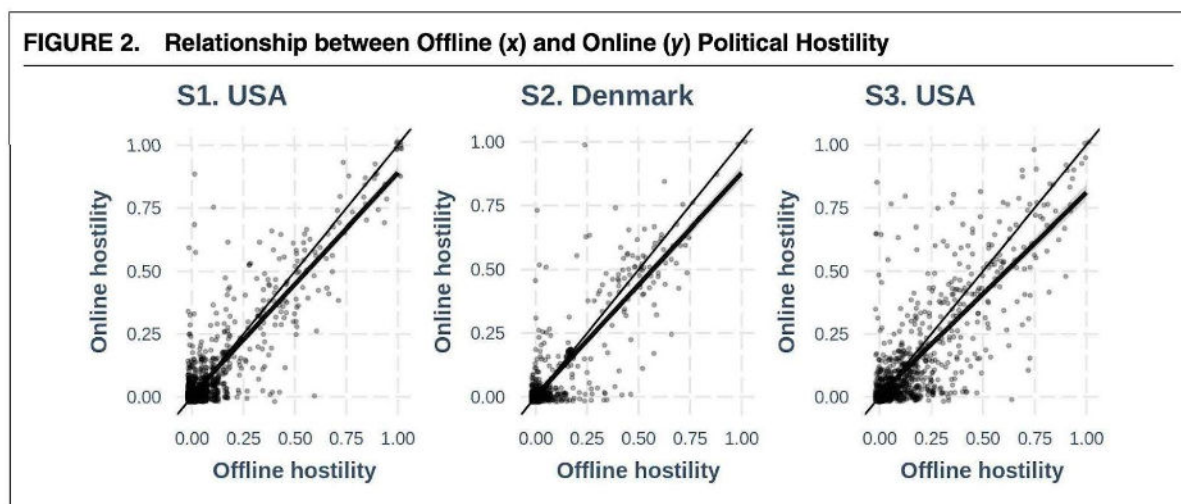
Furthermore it is worth noting that Expectation/Interest-language is also significantly higher in responses than in original tweets.

This supports the hypothesis that algorithms curate content, to promote that which users can be expected to “engage” with. In the applied emotion analysis, Anger/Irritability are much more dominant and significant traits than Expectation/Interest.

An arena for existing hostility

Other researchers argue instead that social media is not manipulating it’s users into uncharacteristically aggressive behavior, but rather just becomes the arena in which already existing bile and vitriol is unleashed.

In *The Psychology of Online Political Hostility: A Comprehensive, Cross-National Test of the Mismatch Hypothesis*, by Alexander Bor & Michael Bang Petersen (AU), there is found no evidence for the hypothesis that platforms promote angering content, or controversial statements, to further “engagement”. Instead the perceived increase in hostile debates is shown to be a result from status-driven and seeking individuals, who are as hostile offline, as they are online. Furthermore, it is shown that the hostile content and aggressive comments made by such individuals online,



(The Psychology of Online Political Hostility: A Comprehensive, Cross-National Test of the Mismatch Hypothesis, Bor & Bang, (AU, 2021))

As noted earlier, some individuals who consider themselves victims of society’s evolution (The Manosphere), are in a position from which they seek a recognition of status - reestablishment of

man's inherent value in society. This status seeking attitude is an increased risk of motivating aggressive and violent behavior, also online. The more some people feel that they are entitled to more status and recognition in their offline lives, the more they are at risk to engage in violent activism, sharing of hostile rumors, moral grandstanding, political conflict and engagement in hostile rumors online. In short, those that seek status are at risk for trying to intimidate others online into giving them that.

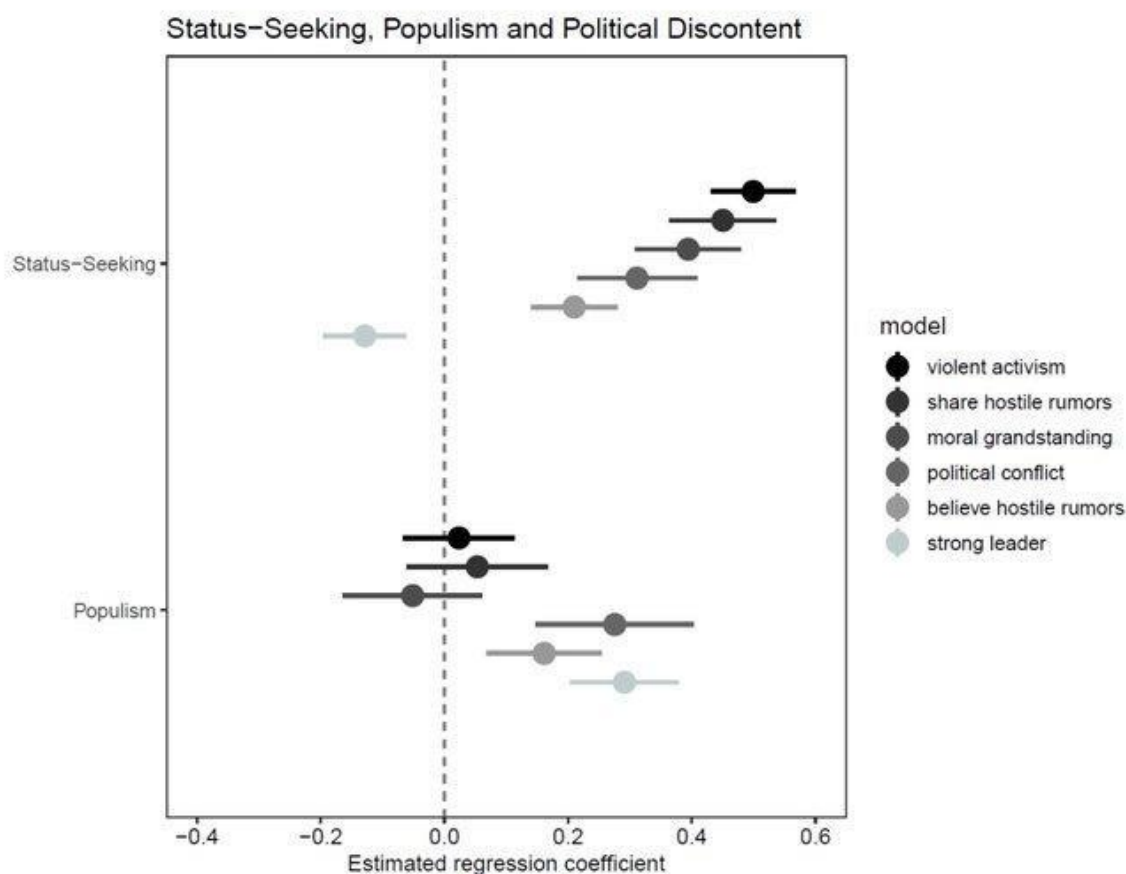


Figure 1. Estimated regression coefficients from models that regress six measures of political discontent on status-seeking motivations and populist attitudes. Unstandardized OLS regressions coefficients with 95% confidence intervals. All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1, allowing us to interpret the unstandardized regression coefficients as the change in percentage points of the full scale of the dependent variable as we move from the low to the high extreme of the independent variable. The models adjust for gender, age, educational level, household income level, and ethnicity.

(*The Psychology of Online Political Hostility: A Comprehensive, Cross-National Test of the Mismatch Hypothesis*, Bor & Bang, (AU, 2021))

This approach, that social media platforms simply become a preferred arena for aggressive political communication, also incentivizes a different solution strategy than if the platforms' design themselves are solely responsible. In such a scenario, any solution would need to refer to the users rather than the news-feed itself. There would need to be a higher responsibility for de-escalation, soft moderation, by site-owners and professional moderators, as well as easier reporting systems for other users. It also necessitates the conclusion that in order to solve the underlying problem, politicians would need to solve the offline woes and experienced inequalities by the online offenders. *"Exclusive focus on SoMe [Social Media Platforms] is convenient because it distracts from political responsibility. But without real reform of societies, nothing will be solved."* says one author of the report, Michael Bang Petersen.

This approach would also point to a radicalization of opinions happening user-to-user, as some might bond over attacking the same victims, rather than from platform-to-user. This would imply a bottom-up or sideways radicalization approach, rather than a historical recruitment- or top-down approach, and should be solved as such. This would negate the idea of active recruitment into politically hostile and digitally violent communities, in lieu of inspiration ("self-radicalization") and status-seeking via force (bottom-up radicalization).

This radicalization process differs from much existing literature and must be understood in a new light, weighing the new self-radicalization process of bottom-up, rather than the active recruitment, or top-down process. The specific group of incels pose several issues if applying a classic P/CVE approach, and must be understood in a hybrid online/offline context which acknowledges the online social interactions, identity exploration and community searching previously addressed. And, most importantly, lend credence to the notion of online social experiences carrying the same weight as those taking place in the physical world. Thus, practitioners must have relevant knowledge and understanding of the online social world - both psychologically in knowledge about group dynamics but also practical and concrete knowledge about platforms and communication forms.

Practitioners must also have knowledge about the individual and social dynamics involved in online radicalization and how this differs from offline radicalization. Deradicalization interventions such as offering alternative and sustainable narrative and network also need to be adapted to the online arena, which again necessitates knowledge and know-how of the online world.