Universität Tübingen
Media Anthropology
Gulzat Baialieva M.A.

Banned: How Dissidents and Outcasts Form Communities on the Internet

By Ari Hoffmann

The question how online communities should be analyzed by anthropologists has

been repeatedly discussed in scientific literature. In the following, I will give examples of two

online communities, while also looking at anthropological approaches that would be suitable

to the outlined situation.

I chose the communities that I want to discuss because they have been on my radar for

quite some time. One is the "incel" community and the other is the English-speaking

European far-right.

My interest in these internet movements started around the time Donald Trump was

elected the 45th president of the United States in 2016. Back then, there was a lot of talk in

the media about the so-called "alt right," a far right internet movement consisting

predominantly of young men, known for their support of Donald Trump, which they often

expressed through memes. The reason why this caused a bit of an uproar was that it marked

the first time in recent memory that young people were mobilized en masse by a right wing

cause. Additionally, a lot of the content that was shared by internet users associated with the

alt right was intentionally controversial, and pushing the boundaries of what could be said on

the internet. Quickly, the alt right became associated with neo-nazism and antisemitism.

I found all this interesting for several reasons: One, I was in the same age group as

those men, and, like them, I spent a lot of time on the internet. Thus, I was familiar with their

references and I could see why this movement was appealing for some of my peers.

Secondly, I have always been fascinated by youth subcultures, and the alt right seemed like an unprecedented phenomenon to me.

For years I read every long-form article I could find on this and similar internet phenomena, and I found two books that had been written on the subject: *Kill All Normies* by Angela Nagle and *It Came From Something Awful* by Dale Beran. In a way, I learned about the history of the alt right while the movement was losing relevance. At the same time, however, I was actively looking for its present-time successors on the web.

On YouTube, I found a Scottish content creator called Millennial Woes. He had built his following in the years between 2014 and 2016, and continued to produce videos for his loyal watchers even after they stopped calling themselves "alt right," which had become a term no one wanted to claim after around 2018. Millennial Woes' content consisted of very simple videos where he simply spoke into the camera, often while smoking a cigarette. What made him appealing was that he was not only talking about politics, but also his struggle with mental illness as well as movies, TV shows and music.

Via Millennial Woes, I learned about an entire network of right wing content creators who knew each other and collaborated frequently. These were mostly Europeans, and they all spoke English. Examples include a Scandinavian channel called "Guide to Kulchur," the Irish YouTuber Keith Woods, and the English "Morgoth's Review." Since these video producers introduced their fans to the others, they managed to establish a stable community, and some fans even know the content creators, and each other, personally. I wasn't aware just how tight this community had become until Millennial Woes was banned from YouTube in 2021.

The far right movement is used to being banned from major platforms. In fact, Millennial Woes had been banned from Twitter years earlier. But losing his YouTube channel was a blow that threatened to reduce his following substantially.

Most Europeans involved in this group of content creators were using Telegram to inform their fans of new video releases, and to encourage discussions. The activist's familiarity with alternative platforms did not end there: Since others had been banned from Youtube years earlier – and the ones that were still on there were expecting to be banned any day – it was common to upload videos on the sites of YouTube competitors like Bitchute. Bitchute had many disadvantages, though, and when Millennial Woes had to decide on a platform for his content, he chose a new site that many activists were very excited about at the time: odysee.com. Having been launched in December of 2020, Odysee immediately became the number one video sharing site for this scene that I had become so familiar with. Compared to pretty much all other YouTube competitors, it was the superior platform. Not only was it bug-free and well designed, but viewers could earn money by simply watching videos on there, via a cryptocurrency that LBRY, the network that runs Odysee, created specifically for this purpose.

All in all, my experience with the European "Dissident Right" – as they like to call themselves nowadays – has mostly taught me about their expertise regarding alternative internet sites and their extraordinary ability to create communities that have real-life effects. This directly connects to anthropological ideas concerning online communities. In his article "The Anthropology of Virtual Worlds: World of Warcraft," Alex Golub reviews three books about *World of Warcraft*, criticizing that the academics who authored them did not sufficiently explore the "offline" side of the issue. Golub points to Tom Boellstorff's ethnographic thesis as a preferable guideline for such endeavors. Boellstorff's thesis emphasizes "the relationship between the virtual (the online) and the actual (the physical or offline)" (Boellstorff 39). The observation that these two realms are closely interlinked has also been made by Ilana Gershon in her book *The Breakup 2.0*. Writing primarily about

Facebook use, she says that "these media are not cyberrealms distinct from other interactions, but rather … inextricably intertwined with every other way" of communicating (Gershon 13–4).

The interconnection between online communities and the outside – "real" – world also offers interesting ethnographic opportunities when it comes to the second community I want to discuss.

The "incel" – *in*voluntary *cel*ibate – subculture has received an immense amount of media coverage, even in Germany. In the public eye, it has become associated with misogyny and real-life shootings, such as the Isla Vista massacre. As the name suggests, "incel" is a term describing someone who is unable to have intimate relationships and sex even though he wants to (I am using the word "he" because this is an explicitly male subculture).

Like the alt right, the incel subculture originated on the message board 4chan, infamous for its completely uncensored and chaotic discourse, and made its way onto Reddit. After just a few years – again similar to the alt right – major platforms like Reddit banned all incel-related talk. Reddit dissolved the incel "subreddits" (a small forum within Reddit dedicated to a specific topic).

Although there are parallels and even some demographic overlap between the incel and the alt right phenomenon, their relationship has been highly exaggerated by most newspaper articles written on the subject. Thoroughly researched books on the topic, like *Kill All Normies*, are more careful when talking about the connection between the two. My own research into incel activity online has made it very clear to me that these are separate spheres.

The incel subculture cannot be analyzed without first understanding the history of the so-called "manosphere," a large internet sphere that goes back to the early 2000s, and which includes "Pick-Up-Artists," Men's Rights Activists and many splinter groups. Another

characteristic is that incel discourse has remained much more closely connected to 4chan "culture" than is the case for the alt right. This 4chan "culture" consists of inside jokes and a specific vocabulary that is highly complex and can be used to identify outsiders immediately.

Thus, one major difference between the "Dissident Right" I have described and the incels I have observed is that the Dissident Right includes, well, functional adults who use their real names and show their faces, while incel content is mostly limited to meme-driven online discourse. The other, logistical difference is the incel community's differing response to their banning.

Instead of taking over alternative platforms (the very unregulated 8chan would be a possibility), individuals created their own forums. They bought domain names and worked without pay as website administrators on these new incel sites (which is a full-time job). I am only familiar with one of those sites, since they are constantly deleted and recreated under different domain names. Between 2019 and 2020, I sometimes visited a forum called incels.co to research this phenomenon further.

The main thing that I took away from reading the – often disturbing – threads was that the forum members absolutely hate it when incels are called a movement, or even a community. They see "incel" as a life circumstance disconnected from any websites. Since all incel sites have always been anonymous, it is in fact difficult to call it a community, which makes it all the more interesting that some users were motivated to build sites around this "identity."

I want to finish this post by recommending two sources about the incel phenomenon which might be academically useful. One is the "Incel Wiki" site, an encyclopaedia of incel "culture" that is directly linked to the forums and written by their members. The other is an excellent podcast simply titled *Incel* by journalist Naama Kates, who – probably

unknowingly – uses Tom Boellstorff's thesis to connect the online incel sphere to real people

in the offline world. Her podcast includes interviews with the creators of the largest incel

forums.

Works cited

Beran, Dale. *It Came From Something Awful*. All Points Books, 2019.

Boellstorff, Tom. "Rethinking Digital Anthropology." *Digital Anthropology*. Routledge, 2012.

Gershon, Ilana. *The Breakup 2.0: Disconnecting over New Media*. Cornell University Press,

2010.

Golub, Alex. "The Anthropology of Virtual Worlds: World of Warcraft." *Reviews in*

Anthropology, 13 Jun 2014.

Nagle, Angela. *Kill All Normies*. Zero Books, 2017.