DRAWING TO DISRUPT: ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES TO THE MANOSPHERE

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Content calling out everyday sexism on social media has grown in prominence in recent years through the work of feminist Instagram accounts such as @theequalityinstitute, @disbonjoursalepute and @vulgadrawings. And yet, for the most part, such accounts have had limited impact on the proliferation of materials associated with the so-called manosphere, which uphold the narrative that men are victims of women's empowerment. Intersecting with colonial, far-right and white supremacist views, this content promotes traditionalist gender norms that eschew feminism and are imbued with misogyny, leading to threats and acts of violence against women (RAN 2021).

Efforts to mitigate the social influence of such movements through CVE counter-narrative campaigns or the removal of content from big tech platforms through de-platforming initiatives have limited efficacy (Conway 2020; Hemmingsen and Castro 2017; Rogers 2020). This is the case for at least three key reasons. First, such content may simply be relocated to niche unregulated dark web environments. Second, violent extremist groups may turn to analogue means to conduct their recruitment processes offline (Berger et al. 2020). Finally, content-driven 'pull factor' interventions will be inadequate if 'push factor' underlying grievances that motivate radicalization processes are not addressed (Vergani et al. 2020).

Popular feminist influencer and cartoonist Lily O'Farrell's (@vulgadrawings) memes about sexism began to engage with the nuances of the manosphere in 2021 when she decided to talk to young men who were trolling her Instagram account. These men had become aware of her account after it was shared in a men's rights subreddit group. Concerned that the group was made up of young men predominantly aged 16-23, O'Farrell decided to investigate the movement by joining incel (involuntary celibate) subreddit groups.

Following these investigations, the cartoonist produced a series of meme drawings titled: 'Everything I've learned about incels' (2021), which illuminates the dynamics of the phenomenon for her mostly feminist 297 000 followers. Instead of demonising incels, her drawings provide an anatomy of the movement that allows viewers insight into its logics (see Figure 1).
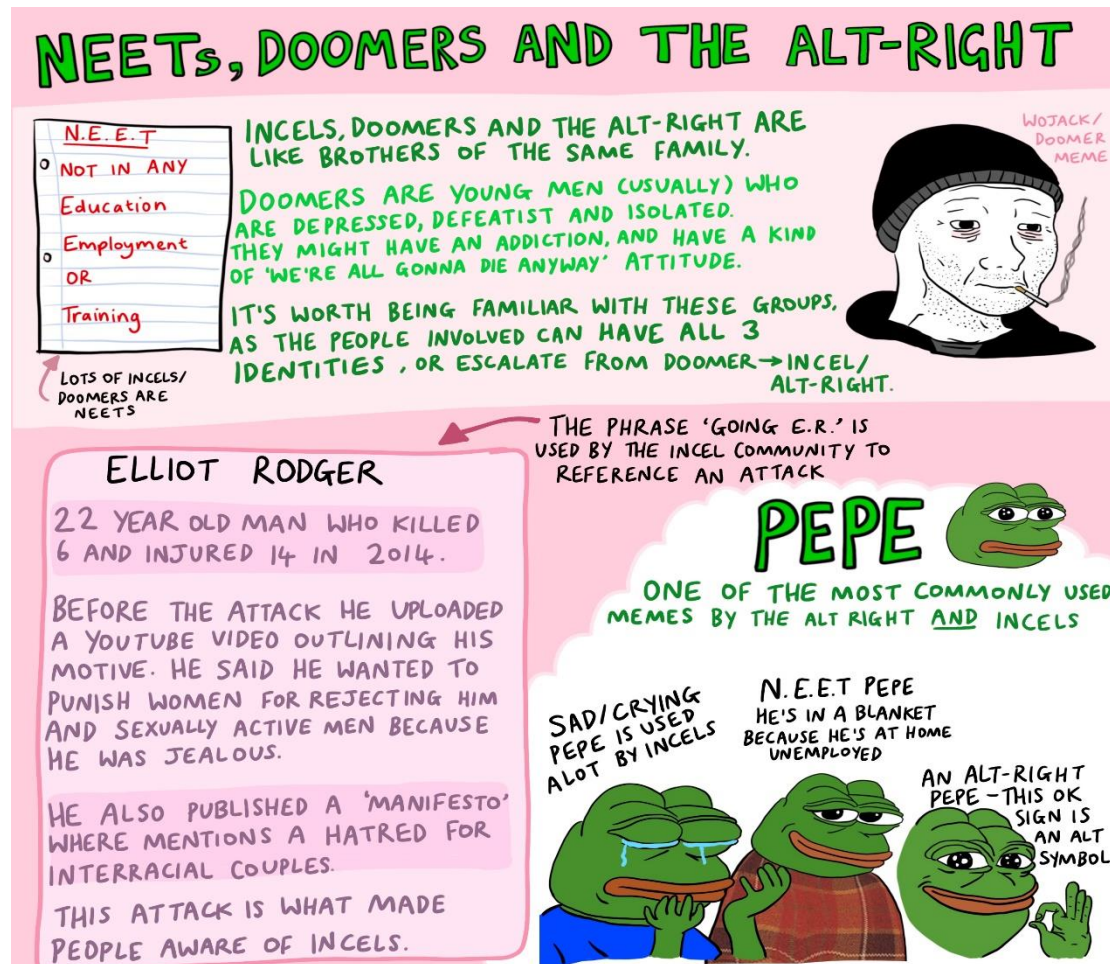

Figure 1. 'Everything I've learned about incels.' Vulgadrawings Instagram post, 2021.

O'Farrell powerfully acknowledges the real and perceived grievances of young men in these groups, such as loneliness, body-image insecurities, lack of mental health support and resources, which are blamed by incels on women (2021). The cartoonist reveals that at one end of the spectrum are pick-up artists. At the other, 'black-pilled' violently-oriented incels who may share NEET (not in any education, training or employment), Doomer and Alt-Right characteristics (depicted in Figure 1). The artist's cartoons expose the root causes of these grievances as being tied to the structures of patriarchy, helping young male viewers on the incel spectrum to see that women are not responsible for, but are instead also victims of, such structures.

In addition to illuminating a disturbing trend, O'Farrell's drawings 'call people in' within a context of calling out everyday misogyny (Ross 2021). Digital anthropologists have established that social networking sites can enable political agency and subversion (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020). Through a multimodal content analysis, this paper considers them as hosts of possible alternative narrative strategies that disrupt gender assumptions through empathetic engagement with young men at risk of violent misogynist radicalization.

Alternative narrative interventions can arguably be deployed to disarm the manosphere and support disengagement from violent extremist discourses. Unlike counter-narratives, alternative narratives can be more effective at challenging extremist narratives because they directly address real and perceived grievances as well as the psycho-social needs that may lead to engagement with extremist discourse.
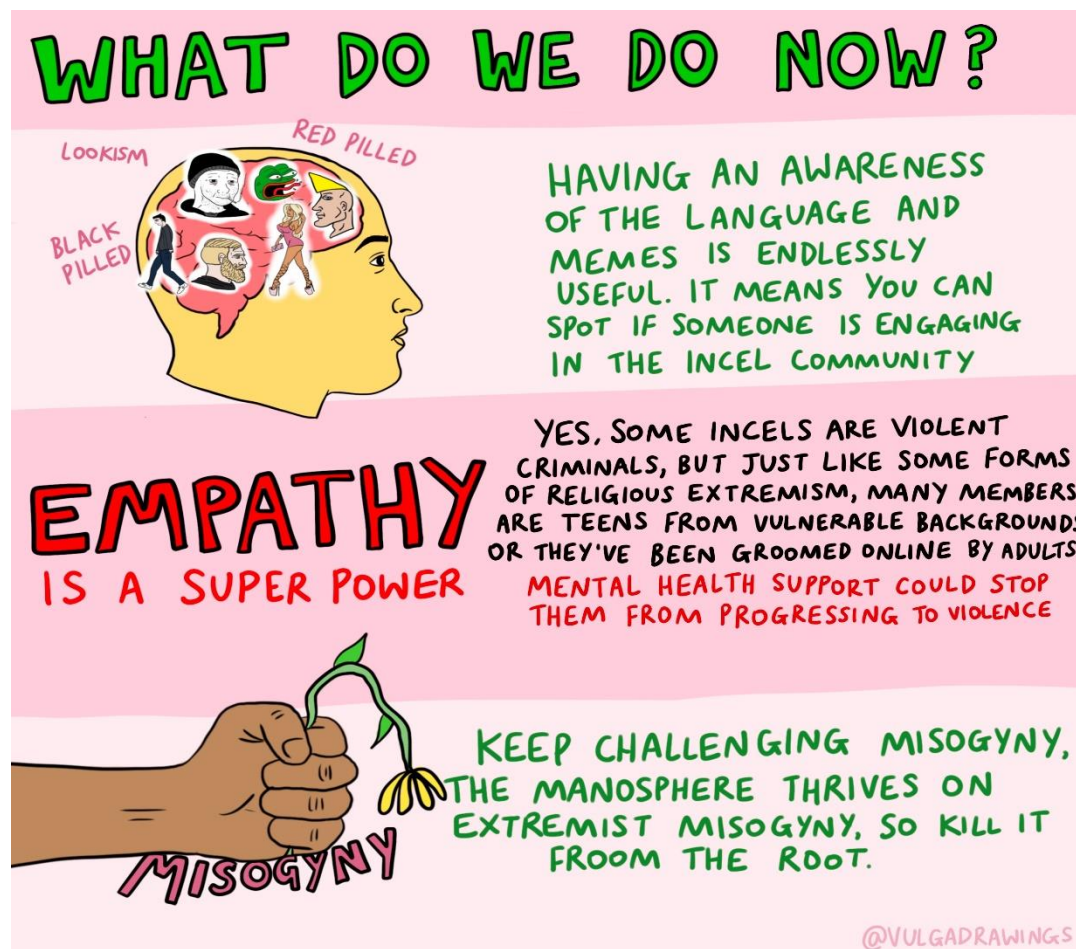

Figure 2. 'Everything I've learned about incels.' Vulgadrawings Instagram post, 2021.

The final slide within O'Farrell's series poses the question of what to do about the phenomenon. It advises the cartoonist's followers to engage in radical empathy, to listen

and challenge the assumptions put forward by adherents of the male supremacist movement. This empathetic analysis and call to arms have led to significant numbers of young men at risk of misogynist radicalization interacting with O'Farrell, with one young man sharing that he had left the movement and found intimacy with a partner after his DM (direct messaging) exchange with the artist.

O'Farrell's memes are an example of an alternative narrative strategy that supports good conflict, cultivating bonding (Williams 2019), bridging and linking social capital while encouraging a shift from 'us and them' to 'we' (Gerrand 2020; Roose et al. 2021). The feminist influencer's works subvert male supremacy, recruitment and engagement with violent misogynist content. In this sense, O'Farrell's Instagram meme-based alternative narrative strategy has the capacity to decolonize, depolarize and encourage movement away from violence-based solutions to grievances toward pro-social radical and resilient action.

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