"I TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND CAME OUT AS GC": EXCAVATING GENDER CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY PRACTICES AND ANTI-TRANS RADICALIZATION ON OVARIT AND MUMSNET

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Abstract

In 2020, the subreddit r/GenderCritical—one of the most active "gender critical" (GC) spaces on Reddit—was banned by the platform for promoting hateful, transphobic conduct. Following the closure of r/GenderCritical (and subsequent banning of dozens of high-profile, transphobic subreddits including r/ActualWomen, r/GenderCriticalSociety, and r/truelesbians), GC users—especially those in North America and Western Europe—migrated to more hidden, invite-only spaces. These included Discord servers as well as (much like alt-right alternative platforms Parler and Truth Social) platforms run by GCs themselves: Spinster.xyz, the short-lived Giggle app, subforums on Mumsnet, and Ovarit—an invite-only forum which imitates Reddit's architecture launched by former moderators of r/GenderCritical. While we might celebrate the closure of openly hateful communities on major social platforms, a crucial side-effect of the GC dispersal is that their activity has become (following patterns in reactionary political movements online more broadly) increasingly shrouded and insular.

In this project, we provide an overview of the current landscape of GC activity on social media as it exists in the post-r/GenderCritical era. We describe how users are "peaked" (the GC equivalent of "redpilled") and pipelined from algorithmic media platforms into insular and extremist spaces such as Ovarit, Mumsnet, and Discord. We then examine discourse within two popular GC forums, Ovarit and Mumsnet (specifically: Mumsnet's "Feminism: Sex & gender" board), to identify how these groups circulate disinformation, perform political mythmaking, and construct and reinscribe reactionary identities in the context of GC ideology and extremism. Specifically, we utilize a mixed-methods

approach and comparative platform analysis (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018) to explore the discourse of both platforms and understand how the social ecologies of the GC Internet interact. By analyzing—through critical technoculture discourse analysis (Brock, 2018)—over 80k posts and comments scraped from Ovarit and Mumsnet, we characterize rhetorical patterns and informational practices endemic to each platform. Drawing from extant scholarship on GC and TERF rhetoric (Billard, 2023; Vincent et al., 2020) and post-truth mis/disinformation (Daniels, 2018; Rieger et al., 2021; Sawyer, 2018; Tripodi, 2017), we explore how GCs collectively train one another to interact with trans people and media. We highlight several crucial findings:

1. **GCs, seeking to invert the political landscape and center a narrative of self-victimization, co-opt the language of queer communities.** GCs regularly imitate the language of queer identity in their discussions of GC feminism. For example, GCs describe their experience "coming out" as GC to family, friends, and co-workers and reflect on decisions to remain "in the closet" for fear of being canceled. This is especially evident in discourse around "peaking"—a term used by GCs to describe a singular, dramatic "egg-cracking" moment at which they "discover" the fraudulence of gender ideology and "realize" they are GC. Through this rhetoric, GCs seek to establish trans identity as a fabricated political ideology while simultaneously positioning GC feminism as a natural identity one comes into.

2. **GC rhetoric regularly imitates the rhetorical practices of other extremist, far-right social movements.** Specifically, Ovarit users seek to construct reactionary "victim ideologies" (Boehme & Isom Scott, 2020) in which they experience righteous backlash from the "queercult" and its allies. Much of Ovarit's discourse and architecture is oriented around frustration with "cancel culture" and silencing. The targets of GC aggression likewise extend beyond trans people and include "the media," liberals, queer people more broadly, and sex workers—the latter of which are targeted for promoting the "pornsick" conditions under which "trans ideology" ostensibly proliferates. Users' emphasis on self-victimization, portraiture of queer people as an ideological cult, denigration of academics and journalists, and antipathy towards "wokeism" all represent GC user's discursive proximity to far-right political movements.

3. **GC spaces on Ovarit are strongly linked to fandom and media literacy practices.** Users are not only encouraged to discuss hobbies and interests (gaming, shows, films, and books), but to engage in community critiques of media objects through the lens of GC feminism. We find that fandom is central both to recruiting new members (many of whom cite clashes with community moderators on other platforms as reasons for joining) and retention (as fans come to expect regular discussions of their favorite media). More importantly, these discussions serve pedagogical purposes by "training" GC community members in information literacy (what Tripodi [2017] calls "scriptural inference")—that is, GC members are taught and practice how to selectively analyze media (both entertainment and journalistic/political) through a GC lens.

4. **GC users regularly perform transphobic mythmaking.** Central to the discourse on these platforms are dramatic tellings of encounters with trans people and "TRAs" (trans rights activists). A mundane run-in with a trans person at a grocery checkout, for example, is described by a GC user in imposing narration as an encounter with "*one of them.*" By examining such stories, we note that beyond exaggeration (if not utter fabrication), these stories are performative and pedagogical: trans people—as folkloric subjects—are culturally ossified through archetypal retellings. In this way, GC users are conditioned to narratively position trans people "in the wild" as monstrous and, in turn, retell such encounters to generate cultural capital through performance.

In the Conclusion of our project, we draw from Cloud's (2018) concept of rhetorical realism to situate the meaning-making practices of GCs on social media. Cloud contends that fact-checking and other informational literacy efforts are ineffective when disinformation is accepted as common sense because it resonates with and reifies users' epistemic "frames" for evaluating truth-claims. While GC communities regularly circulate pseudoscience and unverified anecdotes, we find that the proliferation of trans disinformation on these platforms is precipitated by broader practices of rhetorical performance and meaning-making—reinscribing the political positionalities of GCs as silenced, marginalized victims of the dangerous queercult. Ultimately, we argue that technical deplatforming of GC communities is only one component of addressing anti-trans extremism online. Rather, in order to understand the cultural and epistemic conditions of anti-trans communities, activists and scholars must also explore and address how GC users are behaviorally conditioned towards extremism through information-literacy practices learned on GC forums.

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