The role of digital technologies in mobilizing the alt-right

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In "Misogynistic Men Online: How the Red Pill Helped Elect Trump," published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Pierce Alexander Dignam and Deana A. Rohlinger examine the transformation of online alt-right forums from marginal spaces of misogynistic collective identity to sites of political mobilization. Dignam and Rohlinger focus on how the sudden political pivot of one of these semianonymous forums, the Red Pill, garnered support for Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election. In so doing, they shed light on both the increasing salience of online discourse in contemporary politics and on the central roles that misogyny and antifeminism played in the 2016 campaign and election results.

Members of the alt-right view recent cultural and institutional changes as an attack on what they perceive to be the natural order: a society dominated by white males. As women begin to make social and political gains, online men's rights activists exhibit a backlash that is actually, Dignam and Rohlinger argue, a misplaced response to neoliberalism.

The authors contend that anonymous virtual forums, such as Reddit and Stormfront, have amplified existing misogynistic discourse and enabled men's rights activists to foster a sense of community and oppositional consciousness. The rise of misogynistic online forums and their increasing politicization is indicative of a larger shift in the way the men's rights activists act on their ideology.

Utilizing social movement theory, the authors analyze identity talk to

demonstrate how Red Pill moderators were able to control discourse and successfully spur political action among users. Initially conceived as a space to complain about the perceived demasculization and oppression of men, the Red Pill functioned as a [forum](link) for personal improvement that advocated using "a sexual strategy" to challenge feminism and elevate one's "alpha status."

The authors conducted an inductive content analysis of 1,762 forum posts. Dignam and Rohlinger found that Red Pill users were largely opposed to political action until 2016, believing that political initiatives were ineffective at changing legislation and were too similar to "mainstream" tactics: "Our quantitative analysis revealed a distinct shift in discourse. Between 2013 and 2015, users simultaneously cultivated an oppositional consciousness toward feminism while explicitly distancing themselves from political engagement."

However, the collective identity of Red Pill users became politicized in the months prior to the 2016 election. Politicization occurs when a viable chance to enact change arises, and the authors assert that men's rights activists viewed Trump's candidacy as "an opportunity to reinforce systemic gendered arrangements and, more specifically, while male power and privilege."

In reaction to this opportunity, Red Pill leaders strove to shift users' perception of men's rights from an individualized philosophy to a political cause. Moderators portrayed Hillary Clinton as a political threat and emphasized how Trump's masculine persona aligned with the Red Pill's ideals of financial prosperity, individual success, aggression, and sexual prowess. Forum leaders countered challenges to the Red Pill's new political stance by calling out dissenting users and down-voting critical posts.

The Red Pill was not an enduring example of online mobilization, but its

effectiveness still serves as cause for concern for feminists. The authors propose that it is in feminists' best interest to become more active in studying these virtual forums in order to better understand how digital technologies are driving political discourse and action.

More information: Pierce Alexander Dignam et al, Misogynistic Men Online: How the Red Pill Helped Elect Trump, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (2019). DOI: 10.1086/701155

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