We research online 'misogynist radicalisation'—here's what parents of boys should know

July 1 2024, by Steven Roberts and Stephanie Wescott

Research shows social media can amplify and spread harmful views about women. Credit: Pixabay/Pexels, CC BY

Many parents [are worried](#) about their children using social media. But these concerns tend to focus on privacy, exposure to explicit material or contact with strangers.

As researchers looking at [sexism and misogyny in Australian schools](#) and the influence of [social media](#), we think it is also important for parents to understand how algorithms work.

These can drive misogynistic content towards boys and young men and make [extreme views](#) seem normal.

What does research say about social media?

Researchers are increasingly studying how social media [can amplify social and political divisions](#). It is also [showing how](#) these platforms spread prejudice, hate speech and misinformation.

At the same time, researchers are [identifying a growing divide](#) between young men and women in their attitudes towards gender equality.

Our own [research](#) has found a disturbing increase in sexism, sexual harassment and misogyny in Australian schools. This includes examples of boys physically intimidating women teachers in schools, gaslighting them, saying they are "hysterical", describing gender inequality issues as "myths", and saying things like "Miss, your boobs look really big today".

Similar examples emerged from other Australian research this year.

Our research, done via interviews with Australian teachers, suggests these views are influenced by the rise of figures from the "manosphere" (a collection of extreme men's communities that are anti-women) on social media.

How do algorithms work?

How are boys and young men coming into contact with this content? Algorithms play a huge role in what we all see online.

Algorithms are set up by human coders, but once operational they are automated pathways that direct content to social media users. They are optimized to get us to click, like, share and view content and keep coming back. This is the key commercial goal of the so-called "attention economy". The longer algorithms hold our attention, the more profit they generate for social media companies like Meta.

So, as a social media user demonstrates increasing interest in specific content or activities, they receive more of it.

Boys are 'fed' misogyny online

Recent studies have shown us how boys and young men are being fed misogynistic content.

A 2022 Australian study set up ten experimental YouTube accounts. These included profiles of four boys under 18, four young men over 18 and two blank control accounts.

It showed boys and young men were lured to the manosphere through "recommended video" features that pop up. On YouTube shorts (which feature shorter videos) this phenomenon was worse. The study found the algorithm was seen to "optimize more aggressively in response to user behavior and show more extreme videos within a relatively brief time frame."

A 2024 Irish study made similar findings.

Researchers created 10 fake profiles for TikTok and YouTube shorts on ten blank smartphones. On the two different platforms, the researchers created accounts for a 16- and 18-year-old boy who sought content typically associated with masculine gender norms for their age (such as the gym, sport and video games), a 16- and 18- year-old boy who sought manosphere content, and one blank control account.

Misogynist manosphere content was sent to users regardless of whether those accounts actively searched for it. This was especially the case for the profiles set up as teenage boys seeking out content typically associated with masculine gender norms. All accounts were presented with [masculinist](#), extremist and anti-feminist content and the frequency increased once their account demonstrated interest or engagement.

How does misogynist content radicalize boys?

We believe what is occurring is very serious. In our research we use the term "[misogynist radicalization](#)" to describe what is happening to some boys and young men.

This phrase was selected to capture a stark and sudden shift in boys' attitudes and behavior towards women and girls in Australian schools, which teachers report occurred at the return from lockdown and remote schooling.

Although "radicalisation" is typically used to refer to the process of being recruited to religious or political terrorist ideology, [research](#) has identified misogyny as a feature of right-wing terrorism.

At the same time, the "incel" (or involuntary celibate) community is also being seen as a [possible terrorist threat](#). Incels, who are mostly men and boys, blame and resent women for their own inability to find a sexual partner.

We also know misogyny perpetuates gender inequity and biases that underpin violence against women.

While we are not suggesting boys and young people who are influenced by extremist misogynist ideology will all become violent or recruited to other extremist groups, it is important to consider misogyny as both a form of extremism and as an ideology.

Research shows young people who view misogynist content are likely to harbor unhealthy views on relationships. A 2024 UK study on teenagers also found "manfluencer" Andrew Tate's content is emotionally engaging for boys and young men. It encourages feelings of fear and anger as well as belief in myths about gender equity.

What can parents of boys do?

An outright ban for young people is not necessarily the right step to take (even if such a ban could work). Research tells us social media is an important space for young men to explore their identities, interests and establish connections with others.

So we need education both for parents and young people about how algorithms shape the feeds of young people's social media accounts, and how this content can deliberately exploit their emotions and beliefs.

One key thing parents can do is initiate open, respectful conversations with their children about what they are viewing online.

These conversations should be free of judgment or reprimand and allow children to describe what they are seeing and why it might interest them. Open-ended questions that encourage your children to express their views are a good place to start. For example, "Can you tell me a little about about X? What's interesting about their content?"

Judgment-free conversations are important so young people don't fear bringing up difficult experiences. If you are going to be critical of something, try and do this together, with children contributing to explanations of whether specific content can be harmful and to whom.

You can also talk about the implications of "echo chambers" and how these are generated by algorithms. Some examples might include: "Do you notice you're seeing a lot of content by one particular creator? Or on one particular topic?" or "How does the content you are seeing make you feel?".

There are also lots of useful organizations providing specific advice for parents around algorithms and general safety online.

Watch and listen

Also, be on the look out for any changes in a child's behavior and attitudes towards women and girls.

Are there certain terms they are using that did not before? How do they react if certain figures in the news or popular culture come up in conversations? How are they relating to women and girls in their family and social circles? Do you find them expressing opinions that are not aligned with your family values?

If teachers approach you about problems with your child's behavior at school towards women and girls, try to be open to the conversation (rather than dismiss it as impossible). It is likely what parents see and hear is different to school and online contexts. Indeed, some teachers in our study reported boys expressed different versions of themselves and different views, depending on the audience.

If you do notice your child is expressing some concerning views, as well

as initiating an open, calm discussion with them, we recommend contacting your child's teachers or school well-being team. You can also seek support and advice from the eSafety Commissioner.

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