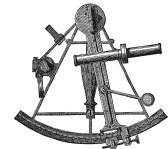


Incelsphere: Incels, masculinities, and homicide in public discourse



Ellen O’Sullivan¹
University College Cork

Abstract

In recent years, incels have gone from a practically unknown online subculture to a social group existing under intense scrutiny from academia and the public alike. Often, this scrutiny is heightened when a violent attack resulting in death is carried out by an individual who claims (or is claimed by) incel identity, as news articles and opinion pieces rush to publish the latest take on violent misogyny. In this article, I discuss the news media coverage of two of incel attacks (the Isla Vista Massacre and Toronto Van Massacre), and use a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how incel identity and gendered dynamics are presented in the public sphere.

Keywords

Incels; masculinities; FCDA; media; homicide

¹ Corresponding Author: O’Sullivan, Ellen.
Email: havesomethingsmall@gmail.com
SEXTANT: www.sextantnotes.com. ISSN: 2990-8124
University College Dublin, Ireland

Introduction

Incel (involuntarily celibate) culture has seeped into mainstream consciousness in the past decade, moving from the depths of internet chatrooms to the public discursive sphere of the newspaper, social media, and television. Cucks, chads, soyboys - perhaps the most evocative part of incel culture is the linguistic development of reductive and often vitriolic rhetoric regarding women and their sexual behaviour, a development that has been (ironically) adopted by the most chronically online among us. However, this joke often obscures the darker roots and ideology of incels, and in the past decade we have seen a plethora of incel-related homicides, primarily in North America, aimed at spreading the blackpill² from the manosphere to the masses. Two of these events had particularly disastrous results: the Isla Vista killings of 2014, where Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured 14 others before killing himself, and the Toronto Van Massacre of 2018, Alex Minassian's tribute to Rodger that left 11 dead.

In this article, I explore the public discourse surrounding these two events by conducting a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) on the newspaper coverage of both atrocities. Violence against women is on the rise globally, and it is necessary to be able to understand how misogynistic discourse, especially in online spaces, influences violent and sometimes lethal behaviour. Exploring how these crimes are presented and discussed in the public sphere is a crucial element of that understanding, and will form the basis of this article. More often than not, the misogynistic motivating factors behind such crimes and the broader sociological link to masculinities are obscured in the media narrative (Drewett, 2020). Here, I question how incel homicide is presented in and as news and what that kind of presentation can tell us about gendered roles and expectations relating to violence in the public sphere.

Methodology

News media plays a central role in the construction of the public sphere (McNair, 2018). In choosing to analyse newspapers for this research, I

² Blackpill ideology is a central tenet to the operational philosophy of the incel movement. Being 'blackpilled' means that an individual has come to terms with what incels believe is the inherent truth that SMV (or sexual market value) is governed by genetics alone, and no amount of self-improvement will change a person's attractiveness. Blackpill ideology tends to foster excessive catastrophising and nihilism, and can give incel culture the 'characteristics of a death cult' (Anti-Defamation League, 2019), as they view both suicide and mass homicide as two of the only real viable options in transcending the blackpill.

take the most established form of mass media, one that is considered reliable and objective, and examine how this medium performs in its reporting of horrific crimes that are the result of a complex system of ideological superiority, gender roles, violence, and domination; crimes that are carried out by a group of people who are typically not associated with mainstream society. I have chosen the cases of Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian in particular, because both of the events were perhaps the most prominent incel-related mass homicides in recent history, and both offer an overt opportunity to interrogate the relationship between hate-centred ideology, violence and public discourse.

Elliot Rodger, the instigator of the Isla Vista attacks, was a 22-year-old student at Santa Barbara City College (Brown, 2015:51). Before engaging in a killing spree and later completing suicide, Rodger uploaded a video on YouTube bemoaning the fact that he was still a virgin, that women rejected and ignored him, and that because of this, he was going to bring about “retribution”, to punish women for isolating him. On May 23rd, 2014, Rodger carried out this “retribution”, murdering six people and wounding 14 others before turning the gun on himself. He left behind a manifesto, claiming that this act of terror that he had committed was purposefully aimed at women in general, “I cannot kill every single female on earth, but I can deliver a devastating blow that will shake all of them to the core of their wicked hearts” (Rodger, no date). Rodger is viewed as something of a foundational deity for inceldom- indeed, the phrase “going ER” means to commit mass homicide as retaliation for sexual rejection (Anti-Defamation League, 2020). In 2018, Alek Minassian, a self-professed incel and follower of Rodger did exactly that. On April 23rd, 2018, Minassian hired a van, and, taking inspiration from previous van attacks carried out by Islamist extremists, drove through the crowded downtown area of Toronto's North York business district. Minassian mounted the footpath and purposely swerved towards pedestrians, killing 10 people, and injuring 16 before being apprehended. Most of his victims were women, and after 10 minutes of driving, Minassian was arrested and imprisoned.

Theoretically, my analysis of the news coverage of these incidents relies on the work of Michelle M. Lazar and her development of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. Perhaps the most important and relevant element of Lazar's work that concerns me for this research is the idea of gender as an ideological structure within discursive practices. Lazar states that from a feminist perspective, gender is conceptualised as a hierarchical system: notions based on subtle sexual differences that

socially manifest into relations of domination and subordination (Lazar, 2005: 146). She further elucidates that although variants and deviations occur in representations of power and gendered expression, these variants occur against the ideological structure of gender that privileges men as a social group, giving them what Connell (2008) terms a “patriarchal dividend”, in terms of access to symbolic, social, political, and economic capital (Lazar, 2005: 146). It is at this junction that I am basing my research: exploring the symbolic and representational privileging of men over women in the public discursive sphere.

Findings and Analysis

I collected two data sets of news coverage, one for each case. These data sets consisted of news coverage of the immediate aftermath of both events and used stratified random sampling to select news publications from local, national, and international media outlets. After collecting the data, I analysed it using FCDA. Through this analysis, the most prominent theme that emerged was Absence. Politics is always present, especially in the spheres of chronicle and aesthetics, and a primary indicator of the subtleties of politics at play is the examination of absence in discourse. Using absence as an overarching thematic lens, various sub-themes emerged from the data, including in/visibility of victims; de-contextualisation of collective identities; and omission of condemnation. Here, I will discuss my findings and analysis in relation to each of the above subthemes.

a. In/visibility of victims

At first, when it began, it was lost to the soundtrack of another Friday night in this bluff-top college town: screeching tires and what sounded like fireworks. But then — shattered glass. Sirens. Screams. Within 10 minutes, it was done — seven dead, 13 wounded, a tormented young man slumped at the wheel of a shattered BMW, a gunshot wound to his head, three semiautomatic handguns and more than 400 rounds of ammunition at his side.

(Los Angeles Times, 2014)

In the majority of international accounts of the Isla Vista massacre, journalists and news outlets appeared to focus entirely on Elliot Rodger himself. The *LA Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times* were, amongst others, prompt to respond with news updates on their websites.

Following the attack journalists gathered more information from law enforcement and news platforms published more substantial articles speculating on the suspected motivation behind the event. A similar reaction was observed after Minassian's 2018 van attack. Examining the public discourse that emerged at the time of both attacks, one thing is glaringly obvious: the victims are almost nowhere to be found. They are often mentioned briefly, in a sentence or short paragraph (Medina, 2014; Walker, 2014; Mandel, 2018; Dempsey, 2018). Even analysing the above quote, which is the first thing that appears in The *LA Times* online archive concerning the shootings, Rodger is the main character. The victims are reduced to a mere four words.

In both circumstances, victims are routinely marginalised and silenced, as the personal details and notoriety of the perpetrator grows. Interestingly, at the time of publication for most of the articles I read regarding Alek Minassian, the majority of the victims had yet to be identified (McQuigge, 2018). This again is an issue to be addressed: the friends and families of those who had been killed were unknowingly watching their anonymised deaths played out on an international stage. Are the international community to be updated before the immediate family of someone who has just been murdered? The media push for "newsworthy" stories often relies on the manifest function of alerting the public over concerns of safety, but the underlying currents of capitalising on the violence of an unexpected event, and dismissing the emotional needs of those personally affected is never critiqued. Although the majority of the victims are women, and the intended message of these acts of violence is aimed at the collective existence of women, there is a notable absence of women in the media discourse surrounding incel violence. The active absence of women in the reporting of these acts of gendered terror only serves to reinforce a subtle but effective prioritising of male experience and expression over female safety. Keeping this absence of women in mind, I am reminded of a case closer to home where a similar thing happened: the murder of Clodagh Hawe and her three sons Liam, Niall and Ryan, by her husband Alan. The discourse surrounding this 2016 case has come under fire from various women's charities in Ireland and feminist thinkers, and even some news outlets themselves, such as The *Guardian*. A critique that originated with Dublin-based feminist blogger Linnea Dunne centres on the inquiry into the ethics of the presentation of the crime to the wider public:

There is a patriarchal narrative that runs through this entire story, from the act itself to the reporting of it, and we need to allow ourselves to see it if we are to find a way to prevent similar events from happening again.

(Dunne, 2016)

Dunne's critique gained traction, and a few days later a *Guardian* columnist published a piece crediting Dunne and encouraging a more critical approach to news stories, particularly those surrounding gendered violence and homicide (Greenslade, 2016). Dunne concentrated on the discursive focus on Alan Hawes "outstanding" character, how he was presented as a pillar of the community, and a caring man, despite the horrific fact that he had murdered his wife and children. As the media focused on the shock that their small hometown in Cavan felt at the atrocity of the crime, the victims shrunk in the reportage until they were barely seen at all. Linnea Dunne noticed this, and spoke out for the victims.

Although the widespread lack of victim identity in narratives has been challenged by feminist writers and organisations - especially concerning femicide - (Women's Aid, 2019), news discourse itself has been slow to change. There are noticeable steps being taken to tackle the issue of prioritising perpetrator narratives, particularly concerning naming and inadvertently lionising the killers, an act which has likely, in the case of Elliot Rodgers, led to social mimicry and mass homicide (Meindl and Ivy, 2017). However, the news still often focuses on the reporting of crime from the perpetrator's point of view: the lead up to the event, the event itself, and the aftermath are all too often centred around the (male) killer's experience. Even though these perpetrators are being named less and less, their identity is still the axis on which the media turns the story.

b. De-Contextualisation of Collective Identity

The media coverage of incel homicide is almost devoid of any thorough investigation of the collective identity of incelism, and this leads to a considerable dearth of public knowledge concerning the links between ideology and gendered violence. Here, I explore the in/visibility of individual and collective identities by interrogating that narrative.

In earlier incidents such as the Isla Vista shooting, news reporting shows a distinct lack of exploration of the communal aspect of incel identity. These men were presented as lone wolves, outcasts and loners (Farberov,

2014; Sherwell, 2014; Edgar and Sherwell, 2014; Craven, 2018; The McQuigge, 2018). The crimes are set against a backdrop that is often described as “quiet Californian university town” (*National Post*, 2015), or an urban centre where acts of extreme violence are rare, “It’s unprecedented. We’ve never seen anything like this in Toronto up until now” (Hui, *et al.*, 2018). Roger and Minassian’s hatred for women and their sexual frustration were not perceived as a marker of their identities or even seen as a primary incentive for their crimes; in the immediate reporting of the events, a tie to a larger and more dangerous community has never been explored. Before the Isla Vista attack, the incel community was very much underground, and Rodger’s crime brought it to light. An avoidance of discussion of incel identity and the relationship of terror to violent misogyny allows the press to disregard the fact that these crimes were committed under a patriarchal regime that allowed the circumstances in which the killers developed ideologies centred on murder and brutality to flourish unchecked. And although the use of the term incel is now more common in mass shooting reporting, that reporting does not offer the audience critical or even substantial information on who or what incels actually are.

This pervasive absence of a thorough investigation into collective identity must become a primary concern of news reporting. There is a need for a public and accessible inquiry into the actions of communities and collective identities that rely on the promotion of violence and domination. Such an investigation would allow us to construct a widespread critical examination of power, and recognise that language is crucial in the construction of hierarchies of domination. It is pertinent to contextualise the interplay of violence and ideology within social discourse- we cannot keep presenting events of social and cultural importance without context and without fostering a culture of critical analysis and the responsibility of high reflexivity. The nuances of incel identity in regards to race are also absent from the public narrative. On internet forums, and often in the manifestos left behind by the perpetrators, the intersection of violence against women and overt racism is a principal theme. Women of colour are often the target of these online tirades as being lesser, disgusting, and subhuman: “America needs to execute all Asian women in order to protect the white race” (Incels.is, 2023); the violence that incels encourage and express is often misogynoirist in the extreme. Recent feminist writings on the incel movement and the misogyny behind it has very much centred on the generic woman, the Everywoman; forgetting that in a patriarchal and

colonial context, the blueprint for this archetype is the white woman. The critique of incel ideology focuses so intently on gender that the racism that accompanies it is often forgotten. Elliot Rodger is an especially demonstrative example of the intricate knot that binds ideologies of gender and racial hierarchy together. He himself was of Asian descent, but Rodger's hatred of women was inexorably bound with his violent racism, as he claimed an entitlement to feminine bodies while simultaneously expressing his own perceived superiority over other men of colour, "How could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me?" (Rodger, 2014, p. 84). Although he was part of an ethnically marginalised group, Rodger was absolutely a white supremacist. This complex relationship with racial identity is a theme that is commonly discussed and debated on the incel forums, where members are lauding the advancement of the white race over those they view as 'degenerate' such as Black, Asian and Indigenous people of colour. None of this nuanced and reflexive relationship with race is ever portrayed in the media, and this lack leaves an important gap in knowledge. White feminism tends to be too overly concerned with gender to be truly intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016; Cargle, 2018), and this wilful ignorance excludes people of colour, the working classes, and those who are less abled. Even though incel identities and violence revolve around gendered domination, the omission of classed, abled and racialised identities does not solve these issues but rather serves to perpetuate hegemonic ideals of segregation and submission.

c. Omission of Condemnation

When incidents of extreme violence like incel attacks occur, the search for something to blame is omnipresent. There are two areas which tend to bear the brunt of this blame: gun accessibility and poor mental health of the perpetrator. This is especially prevalent in the United States. The media coverage surrounding both the Isla Vista attack and the Toronto Van massacre was no different; calls for restrictions to gun access were widespread regarding Elliot Rodger, as was the implication that poor mental health was a primary motive in both homicides (Holpuch, 2014; Pengelly and Williams, 2014; Kaplan, 2014; Bell, 2018; Dempsey, 2018).

Mental health struggles of the perpetrator have long been a popular scapegoat for dismissing a more nuanced interrogation of crimes linked to ideological supremacy. Minassian and Rodger were both individuals who had a history of poor mental health, Minassian struggling with anger

management, and Rodger with anxiety and social integration (Brugger, 2014). Minassian's mental health history in particular was interrogated, and details of his autism diagnosis reveal that he found it difficult to fit in with his peers, and often displayed non-normative behaviour; "He was mentally unstable back then...He was known to meow like a cat and try to bite people," (Grimaldi, 2018). Interestingly, in many of the news reports of Elliot Rodgers, a particular incident is referenced regularly, involving Rodgers and his roommate (who he went on to murder). Rodger accused his roommate of stealing three candles from him, and performed a citizen's arrest (Farberov, 2014). Although the manifest function of this particular anecdote may be to demonstrate the irascibility of Rodgers character under fairly benign circumstances, it has an underlying hint of the subtle agitations that Rodgers encountered, and, as he was mentally 'unstable' (Sherwell, 2014), implies that it was inevitable that he acted in the way he did. This insistence on poor mental health as a motivating factor behind incel attacks is problematic on a variety of fronts, and disregards the fact that people who suffer from mental illness are much more likely to be the victims of acts of violence rather than the perpetrators (Bushman et al., 2018, p. 5).

As with poor mental health, access to guns and violence associated with lax gun restrictions in the United States have been promoted as the underlying rationale of violent extremism. The discussion of incel violence quickly turns to a debate on access to weapons (Medina, 2014; Ross, 2014). Of course, gun violence is very real, but the media's blame on external sources lies uneasily with the actual reality of both cases: Rodger and Minassian were both seeking mental health guidance before the killings, and both lived in places where gun possession is heavily restricted. Even so, the liberal media continued to espouse reform to gun control laws and access to mental health facilities, without fully recognising the impact of ideology and hate in these circumstances.

Bullying is also often seen as a source of blame in the media. These young men have frequently been bullied or excluded by their peers, often for a number of years, and in different social environments, like school, recreational activities, and home. The targeted victims of incel violence tend to be people who represent this bullying, but who are in a vulnerable position. For instance, Rodger's obsession with being rejected by white women led him to target unsuspecting young women in their own homes (*Los Angeles Times*, 2014). This trend in the shooting, of the perpetrator targeting the representational but ultimately more vulnerable, is common across all mass homicides (Collier, 1998). When the bullying narrative

emerges, it suggests that this is a substantial excuse for violence, and even homicide. This narrative ignores the reality of countless children from marginalised communities who are victimised, especially children of colour, queer children, and those who don't otherwise fit into a 'normative' social narrative. Like those who suffer from poor mental health, these individuals are more likely to be the victims of violent crime rather than the ones carrying it out.

By outsourcing the blame to more tangible and individualised proponents, mass society avoids encountering the fact that incels and other violent supremacist groups are not something removed, but are rather representational of contemporary culture in its most extremist form. Guns and mental health are obvious factors that aggravate the underlying problem of extremist violence and ideologies, but are not the fundamental issue itself. Incel attacks are an exemplification of what happens when entitlement doesn't get what it wants and, bolstered by hateful rhetoric, results in violence.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored how the media reports on incels in the context of mass homicides and how that presentation impacts the public perception of incel-related violence. From examining the newspaper coverage of incel homicides, it is clear that the media present incel identity to the public in a way that prioritises them over their victims. Victims, especially women, often become obscured in the narratives surrounding their own deaths, and the philosophies of misogyny and sexism that inform the violence that killed them is left unexplored. The way the media speaks about incels, and how their identity is discursively formed prevents the public from analysing these crimes in the context of history and social patterns. We are too ill-informed from this superficial presentation to accurately critique, and fundamentally, to do anything about the continuous rise of violent masculinity and incel culture.

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