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### Where Boys Go to Become Men

The political landscape of the United States has always been a bit of a mess. Ever since our country was founded, outbreaks of infighting have become a staple of the democratic process, whether it be among the people or the politicians themselves. Since the dawn of the digital age, though, it seems that process has been practically reinvented under the reign of social media. With the introduction of the smartphone has come a litany of online communities dedicated to discussing, defending, and promoting their favored ideologies. In the beginning, there was little to be concerned about when it came to the activity of these various groups. Reflecting back on the evolution of digital politics, Katie Harbath writes: “With the advent of social media in the early 2000s, new platforms emerged nearly every year that would transform how candidates communicated, voters engaged, and the media covered the day-to-day horse race. For the first 20 years, many platforms embraced their role in the democratic process” (Harbath and Fernekes). For the most part, it seemed that the internet was becoming a primarily positive tool for Americans to access and share information with one another, and although quarreling and conflict still played a large role in the online scene, it remained mostly contained and inoffensive to the outside world. These days, however, that is no longer the case.

Anyone old enough to remember the events of the 2016 presidential election will likely agree that political discourse has morphed rapidly since that fateful year, with the aggressive nature of the subject being exacerbated by an almost immeasurable degree. Donald Trump, in

particular, has been cited numerous times by average citizens and experts alike as one of the primary harbingers of this wave of hostility. Moreover, this antagonism has expanded beyond a simple difference in values and begun to disproportionately affect various minority groups, with Americans being increasingly targeted for their identity regardless of their political beliefs. In fact, an article published by Trends in Cognitive Sciences found that “hate crimes increased substantially during Trump’s presidency [...] These trends continued throughout Trump’s presidency, with annual hate crimes remaining around 20% higher during his administration. Other research specifically tied these increases in hate crimes to Trump himself” (Ruisch and Ferguson). Even more horrifying was the finding that “Trump’s rhetoric emboldened people to express prejudices they previously kept hidden, and may even have shifted their privately held attitudes” (Ruisch and Ferguson).

With the rise of bigotry and the president’s continuously contentious demeanor, many were left wondering how such a man could win the people’s vote to begin with. Although it’s fairly well-known that Trump’s campaign was supported most by white non-college graduates, that knowledge alone does not explain the drastic, nationwide shift in attitudes that’s taken place over the years following 2016. Although this demographic certainly did bolster his campaign, his success was not inflated purely because his followers were caucasian; rather, their support was being “heavily determined by views on race, ethnicity and immigration. [...] the more negative their views on African Americans, other seen as non-white, and immigrants; the more they believed whites were subject to discrimination; and the more central whiteness was to their identity, the more likely whites were to vote for Trump over Clinton” (Brewer). This crowd of voters did not appear out of thin air, either. For most, the idea of the white genocide theory in any capacity is demonstrably ridiculous and would take only a mere Google search to disprove.

However, a study conducted by Social Forces found that conservatives are particularly vulnerable to conspiracist thinking for a number of reasons: “As early as the 1950s, conservative media activists justified the need for conservative channels of political discourse—newspapers, radio shows, publishing houses, and eventually television networks—as an alternative to the presumed liberal bias they saw in mainstream media. They championed a populist stance that elevated the voices of “real Americans” (i.e., white, cisgender, and heterosexual men) amid the challenges to American social order represented by the Civil Rights movement and movements for women’s and LGBTQ rights” (Carlson and Ramo). Because this way of thinking has been so prevalent among right-leaning circles for almost a century, conservative news outlets have not only become isolated from the rest of American media, but highly distrustful of it. This system of operation has essentially created the perfect conditions for conspiracy theories to take hold, as decades-long tensions between regular American media and conservatives have left it nearly impossible for anyone outside of these inner circles to correct the spread of false narratives without being immediately attacked and rejected. As explained by Tom Nichols of The Atlantic: “Trump’s rejection of expertise is reckless, but it is also clever. It forcecloses any unwelcome input from experts, especially because they are likely to appear only in media Trump has already anathematized. In his circular rationalizations, experts are not experts, because real experts would always agree with him” (Nichols). The COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect example of this, as the National Library of Medicine refers to Trump’s actions during this time as a “war on science” (Webb and Kurtz). During his time in office, he demonstrated a staunch rejection of expert opinions that not only punished both scientists and healthcare workers, but increased the amount of damage inflicted on the American public by COVID-19 pandemic. According to Jeff Tollefson from Nature: “Many Experts blame Trump for the country’s failure to contain the

outbreak,” both because of his public words and his decisions as president, which included making “political tools out of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), ordering the agencies to put out inaccurate information, issue ill-advised health guidance, and tout unproven and potentially harmful treatments for COVID-19” (Tollefson). Although this era was hardly the only time Trump was accused of promoting misinformation, it was at this point in time that it was at its most harmful to all citizens, not just those following him.

Since the plague of partisanism left in his wake, the United States has yet to fully recover. On the contrary, it seems this way of leading has only been adapted by alt-right opportunists looking to recreate the president’s success, and thus has led to a new crisis awaiting the American people. While Trump continues to preserve the loyalty of the older generations, younger citizens have begun to turn to the internet to carve out their own place in the broader world of politics. As a result, the terms “red pill” and “incel” have become more and more recognizable to the public as followers of these movements continue to expand and multiply. The former of the two phrases came first, being used to describe one’s “realization” that men do not hold systematic power or privilege. Instead, they awaken to the “truth” that socially, economically, and sexually men are at the whims of women’s (and feminists’) power” (Kelly et al.) Those who believe they've experienced such an awakening then flock to platforms like 4chan and Reddit, websites that have become infamous for harboring echo chambers for some of the most extreme radicalists on the web. This is where many incel communities came to be, with the term referring to men who’ve labeled themselves as “involuntary celibates.” There, these ideologies are allowed to fester, strengthen, and interact with one another outside of the public’s eye, ultimately creating what is now known as the “alt-right pipeline.” As explained by one

former member of the alt-right, these social networks target young, insecure white men who are angry at the world and teach them to blame these complicated emotions on women, a thought process which is largely justified by what's known as the "80/20 rule." This philosophy states that 80% of women only desire 20% of men, which "means that the vast majority of men will never be desirable and consequentially will never find sexual fulfillment and happiness. Among incels, the red pill represents the realization that feminism has caused a massive shift in power, and that feminism (understood by incels as women having the right to sleep with anyone they wish), gives women far too much power" ("The Extremist Medicine Cabinet: A Guide to Online "Pills"). As such, these spaces become ways for incels to feed off each other's hatred of the outside world until it's practically bursting from its confines, leading these users further and further down the rabbit hole until these philosophies have completely consumed their lives. The consequences of these types of online groups have been researched extensively, with one important conclusion being that "When groups engage in extended discussion toward consensus, the result is an increase in the extremism of individuals' attitudes" and that "individuals who agree with a moderate position on an issue are brought to greater extremism" as a result of these interactions (Warner).

While this pattern of digital radicalization has existed for many years now, its dangers didn't reach their true potential until the creation of TikTok. Since then, the way the alt-right conducts itself has been completely radicalized by short-form content, which has been used to repack dense, complex political issues into brief clips of entertainment most widely consumed by users under 18 years old. Where these communities had already been targeting young adults and teens for several years, the range of their message had now been expanded with the opportunity to take advantage of the app's large demographic of children. This is where

Americans have begun to notice the rise of influencers labeling themselves as self-help gurus, motivational speakers, pick-up artists, or financial advisors; essentially, people who advertise their ability to give important advice and radically improve their followers' lives. The cycle then continues as follows: users are enticed by the apparent wealth, popularity, and charisma of these online figures and are reeled in with the promise that by subscribing to them, they too can achieve such an extravagant lifestyle. The messages start out fairly harmless, often promoting rather vague and obvious morals like hard work or self-confidence. Interwoven into these mantras, though, are the very same alt-right rhetorics found in the more extreme corners of the internet. For instance, gurus will commonly harp on the idea of self-discipline. To develop self-discipline, one needs to distance oneself from the vices and distractions of life, ranging anywhere from simple hobbies like gaming to more serious addictions like alcoholism. Another potential point of weakness they will often warn viewers about, though, is women. It begins with the emphasis that lusting after women can be as much of a distraction as things like gambling or smoking, however, the sentiment will quickly shift: not only are women a distraction, but they are actively and purposefully looking to ruin your life; and not only are they trying to ruin your life, but our society is intentionally giving them the power to do so; and not only is society giving them the power to do so, but the authority and civil rights of men across the country is under attack as a result, and if these women are allowed to have a voice in how our nation operates, men will soon become an oppressed minority. Suddenly, it's no longer these men's own fault for spending copious amounts of time and money on porn or being unable to find a partner, it's the women's fault for seducing them. This is just one small example of how well-intentioned life advice can be twisted to deliver a much more sinister message, one that has unfortunately captivated the minds of many young people as of late.

One of the best known examples of this type of influencer is Andrew Tate, a former kickboxer turned social media star. Although Tate has been somewhat of a celebrity since the late 2000's, his fame peaked at an entirely new level around late 2022 when he began to turn heads with his outlandish and misogynistic opinions. As seen in many of the formerly discussed alt-right TikTok creators, he's repeatedly denied being sexist or misogynistic in any form. Rather, he claims that he simply values tradition much more than most, and that the backlash he receives is simply a product of "wokeism." In reality, this excuse merely serves to downplay the severity of his beliefs, as outlined by Will James of McGill University: "his viewers are presented with fantasies of what an "ideal" and "successful" life can be. Tate's version of an ideal, successful life is one that promotes male supremacy and female inferiority, including the subjugation of women [...] For instance, Tate views women as the property of men and he says that women bear responsibility for their attacks in rape cases" (James). With a reputation so heavily defined by such outrageous dogmas, it's incredible that such a polarizing personality was able to attract over 10 billion views on TikTok before his account was removed; but, once again, we're able to discern the same tactics that skyrocketed Trump to presidency nearly a decade earlier. Fear-mongering, circular reasoning, and blanket assumptions are staples of both these men's campaigns, leading to the same result across two generations: an army of aggressive, radicalized followers distrustful of mainstream media and unusually susceptible to conspiracist thinking.

Following his rise to fame, Tate's success was put to a complete halt after being arrested by the Romanian government on charges of both human trafficking and rape. Consequently, the red pill movement's presence in the public sphere has mostly diminished, although it's far from being over. Tate was quickly succeeded by two other figureheads within the alt-right community, both of whom are streamers. The first, Adin Ross, is a close friend of Andrew Tate and one of

the people most responsible for exposing him to a younger audience. Although the influencer initially built his platform on the streaming service Twitch, Ross was eventually banned from the website for what moderators deemed “hateful conduct.” Because of this, he signed a deal with another streaming site known as Kick not long after, and has remained one of their most popular creators ever since. Sneako, another streamer on Kick, is the second most notable personality flourish after Tate’s departure, and has also maintained a close friendship with the former fighter. With these two men becoming the new de facto leaders of the incel community, the age range most likely to be exposed to their content is once again lowered. From Donald Trump at age 77, Andrew Tate at 36, and Sneako and Ross both in their 20’s, we can see how extreme doctrines of the alt-right are made to resonate with younger generations. In fact, a recent viral video from September of this year shows Sneako surrounded by a small crowd of young fans, none of whom appear to be over the age of 14. In this clip, the children can be seen chanting offensive phrases such as “F\*ck the women” and “All gays should die,” all the while the influencer struggles to stop them.

Although this incident was brushed off by most of its viewers, it demonstrates a dangerous precedent being set for young Americans. Although the video is easily excused with a “boys will be boys” mindset that Sneako later used to defend himself, this behavior has only become more and more common in classrooms across the country. One teacher describes how he has seen “toxic masculine behavior allow young boys to distance themselves from others. It is common to see young men and boys practice the expressions and behaviours of what men are supposedly meant to express in a public setting. These behaviours and expressions are encouraged and enhanced by individuals such as Tate. These expressions usually resemble holding athletic and physical strength as superior and promoting patriarchal social systems”



(James). Unlike the adults perpetuating these ideologies, children are simply incapable of grasping the gravity and dangers of this type of indoctrination. While some may eventually grow out of this phase, there will be many who won't, and by the time the consequences reveal themselves it may already be too late.

Unfortunately, despite the clear warning signs, this era of alt-right media has not existed long enough for us to accurately measure the potential damage it could inflict on our youth. However, if these types of digital communities are allowed to evolve outside the guidance of both government and parents, we will only continue to see more children like the few demonstrated in that fateful viral video. It's vital that America addresses the problem now before it gets completely out of hand, as the longer this issue is ignored, the stronger it will grow. Although companies like Twitch have made the right decision in banning such extreme levels of bigotry, they cannot be relied on to guarantee the safety of young users online. Likewise, because the internet is such a rapidly evolving medium, it's practically impossible for the policies to adequately combat every threat that arises. This means that citizens are responsible for educating themselves in order to keep the growing impact of the alt-right pipeline at bay, with many educators calling for parents to take the first step: "I don't think schools can tackle this on their own. Parents play a very important role" (Weale). Although it can certainly be difficult to keep up with how culture is evolving through the internet, it's more important than ever for families and educators to stay informed on what and who their children are interacting with, regardless of how tedious or complicated that task may seem. Knowing where and what the dangers are, how they can ensnare us, and what the potential consequences of that are is vital to ensuring a brighter future for our country.

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