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Commentary

#NotMyFandom: The gendered nature of a misogynistic backlash in science fiction fandom

Over the course of the last decade, we have seen attempts by mainstream media to improve diversity in mediums such as films, television shows, comics, and video games. For example, the film industry has focused on improving the representation of women characters, whether that be via an increase in female lead roles in franchises (such as *Terminator Dark Fate*, *Wonder Woman*, and *Captain Marvel*), or via ‘gender swapped’ casts in remakes and sequels (such as *Ocean’s 8*, *What Men Want*, *Overboard*, and *Ghostbusters Answer The Call*). Such attempts by the film industry have had varying levels of success with fans and critics; however, it is the misogynistic backlash generated in response that is the focus of this article. I propose this backlash warrants attention from feminist psychologists, as prior research has come from the fields of media studies and communication science and tend to lack critique of the gendered nature of misogynistic behaviour.

Research by Farrell, Fernandez, Novotny, and Alani (2019) has identified an increase in misogynistic language in online spaces such as the ‘manosphere’ (a collection of web-based communities informed by misogynist and/or far-right ideologies). Groups within the manosphere include MRAs [men’s rights activists], pick-up artists, fathers’ rights campaigners, incels [involuntarily celibate], and anti-feminists. Online spaces occupied by the manosphere include (but are not limited to) Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, YouTube, 4chan,

and 8chan. Developments in technology has helped bolster the rise of the manosphere (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and social media has enabled easier and wider dissemination of misogynistic messages by non-elites (Stanfill, 2020).

Misogynistic behaviour is not limited to vitriolic language (Farrell et al., 2019), but also encompasses a range of other behaviours. For example, ‘dogpiles’ in which users attack a target victim with vast quantities of harassing messages and images (e.g. targeted harassment towards actors Kelly Marie Tran and Leslie Jones); boycott calls whereby users en masse call for a product to be boycotted (e.g. fans boycotting *Ghostbusters Answer The Call* for its female-led cast); gatekeeping; petitioning for women to be fired from their jobs (e.g. Kathleen Kennedy, producer of the *Star Wars* franchise); and targeted low-score reviews for products seen as progressive. There has also been what Stanfill (2020) refers to as ‘campaigns of terror’ orchestrated by users from platforms such as 4chan and Reddit. Perhaps the most well known was GamerGate in 2013 which centred around sexism, harassment, and progressiveness in video games. There was also the Sad Puppies campaign (2013-2017), which targeted the Hugo Awards (for science fiction and fantasy literature) with the goal of preventing writers who were women, LGBT+, and/or an ethnic minority from winning awards for their work. Belittling women’s reactions to harassment in fandom is also a current problem which we need to challenge. I agree with Farrell et al.’s (2019) contention that violent language (regardless of the harasser’s intent) is no less ‘real’ or insignificant to the recipient simply because it takes place online. Likewise, Drakett and Kenny (2018) contend that the distinction between online space and ‘real life’ is arbitrary, and the notion online behaviour is consequence-free is problematic as it neglects the real life impact the behaviour has on the recipient.

In recent years, other behaviours have emerged as part of a backlash response to science fiction franchises making moves towards progressiveness. *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, and *Star Trek* have all received a backlash from fans for diversifying their casts and this has led to fans targeting cast and crew members in online spaces such as Twitter with sexist, homophobic, and racist abuse. In the case of *Doctor Who*, Eeken and Hermes (2019) believe that the backlash to the revelation that the new ‘Doctor’ was to be played by a woman (Jodie Whittaker) was only temporal in nature and centred around the general public feeling distressed by the ‘unsettling’ of gender categories. I contest Eeken and Hermes’ suggestion that the backlash was only temporary and argue the intersectional nature of this backlash is being occluded. There have been criticisms made by feminists (e.g. Drakett & Kenny, 2018; Stanfill, 2020) about how commentators and fans alike tend to minimise or deny the inherently gendered nature of online interactions. In media studies, the term ‘anti-fandom’ refers to individuals who actively and vocally dislike a specific text (Gray, 2005). However, Stanfill proposes the concept ‘reactionary fandom’ is perhaps more useful than anti-fandom, as the latter simply indicates opposition to a text and fails to interrogate the sexist/racist elements of the behaviours being performed. Dean (2017) points out that no fandom is necessarily or intrinsically political, but through certain conditions become ‘politicised fandoms’. Dean believes studying the intersection of politics and fandom has value, particularly in theorising how fandoms become politicised.

Like Dean (2017), I believe it is important for us to consider and theorise the conditions under which fan communities become political. Since the financial crisis of 2007/08 the political landscape has shifted with a rise in populist politics, exemplified by the UK’s Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016. The 2010s saw the rise of the alt-right movement (short for alternative right) which Mark Potok (an extremism

expert who works for the Southern Poverty Law Center) argues is a rebranding of the white supremacist movement (Lough, Needles, & Karbelnikoff, 2018). Potok explains how alt-right members present themselves as ‘defenders of free speech’ fighting a ‘liberal elite’ which has ‘infiltrated’ politics, governance, and institutions such as education and media. Similarly, Kaitlyn Regehr believes that the incel term has been hijacked by a deeply misogynistic online culture which is increasingly influenced by alt-right groups (Bothwell, 2020); while Stanfill (2020) has noted a growth in disturbing connections between fandom and reactionary politics. In fandom, there appears to have been an emergence of reactionary politics with conspiracy theories, fake news, and misogynistic messages being disseminated by YouTubers (such as Bowlestrek, Doomcock, Nerdrotic, Midnight’s Edge, MechaRandom42) and via Twitter hashtags (e.g. #BoycottBBC; #scrapthelicensefee; #RIPDoctorWho; #NotMyDoctor; #FandomMenace; #FAKETREK; and #GoWokeGoBroke), creating a hostile environment for fans who are women, LGBT+, Islamic, and/or an ethnic minority.

Politicisation is also appearing in spaces within academia, specifically the British Psychological Society [BPS]. The March 2020 issue of members’ magazine *The Psychologist* had a predominant focus on decolonising psychology which drew a lot of attention both online and within the following issues’ letters pages. While some members were supportive and enthusiastic about the increased focus on social justice issues within the magazine, there were also BPS members who expressed their frustration with the magazine’s shifting focus. For example, John Marshall and Rod Hoebet who both argued that psychology ‘has no business in politics’ and should concentrate on ‘cutting edge science’. Others such as Relajo-Howell and Nicola Beaumont accused the magazine of becoming increasingly biased towards left-wing politics and criticised the publication of anti-Brexit and anti-Trump sentiments. Relajo-Howell (2020) went so far as to write a blog piece arguing the magazine has an anti-

straight, white male agenda and lamented the magazine's lack of attention to research by conservative, right-wing leaning academics such as Jordan Peterson and Noah Carl. This latter suggestion is alarming, given how Peterson and Carl's work have become associated with the Intellectual Dark Web [IDW]. IDW refers to those who oppose identity politics, political correctness, and claim their views are being silenced (Weiss, 2018). The status of critical and feminist research has historically been subject to contestations within the BPS and the field of psychology more broadly. As feminist psychologists we should be concerned about alt-right influences creeping into debates over what psychology should be.

Relajo-Howell's (2020) accusations of an anti-straight, white, male agenda strikes similar to conspiracy theory arguments dominating both the manosphere and fandom spaces. For example, reactionary *Star Wars* fans sent death threats to director Rian Johnson claiming *The Last Jedi* film had a 'man-hating' agenda by giving prominent leadership roles to women characters. Alongside boycott calls, a petition to have the film 'removed from canon' was launched, along with a crowdfunding campaign to remake the film, and a 46-minute fan edit *The Last Jedi: De-Feminized Fanedit* with all women removed from the film was created. This is not simple dislike of a media text, but an entwining of reactionary politics, hatred, and fandom. The politicisation of fandom is perhaps particularly explicit in regards to the BBC with accusations of a 'left-wing PC [Political Correctness] agenda' in shows such as *Doctor Who* and *The War of the Worlds* for their diverse casting, 'Trump-like villains', and highlighting of issues such as civil rights and climate change. The parallels between anti-liberal discourse being espoused by 'fans' and critics of the BPS should not be overlooked and need examining with consideration of the socio-political context in which this discourse has developed.

We also need to be mindful of strategies being used to dismiss feminist critique of misogyny, and trivialise women's experiences of harassment. Banet-Weiser (2018) describes how death and rape threats have become normalised in online spaces, with perpetrators being afforded anonymity, while Regehr raises concerns about the potential for hatred and violence to shift from online spaces to public spaces in the form of violent hate crimes unless misogyny starts being taken seriously by social media companies and law enforcement agencies (Frymorgan & Rawles, 2019). Not being taken seriously appears to be a recurring pattern with misogynists being depicted as 'lone wolves' with no acknowledgement of the networked nature of the manosphere. Banet-Weiser (2018) outlines at length how popular misogyny is dismissed merely as isolated events committed by anomalous, extreme individuals. Trolling is constructed as gender-neutral in nature, performed by bored individuals, and so in turn, women's responses to this are belittled as being inordinate. Indeed, news outlets such as *The Guardian*, *Wired*, and *SYFY Wire* trivialise reactionary fans as a 'tiny, but loud' minority. In one such example, *The Guardian* (Kirkley, 2020) builds up a narrative of *Doctor Who* having a history of critical fans, but neglects how more recent attacks on the show intersect with misogyny and populist politics. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that an individualised construction of misogyny not only normalises oppressive behaviour, but also renders invisible the deeply embedded networked context of popular misogyny. This means that popular misogyny is constantly moving and emerging in different spaces and manifests in various ways not immediately recognisable as misogyny and so is difficult to avoid.

Research on the manosphere and anti-fandom have tended to come from the fields of media, and communication studies. I believe that feminist psychology is well placed to not only critique how gender and power are operating in and through the manosphere, but also how this misogynistic backlash is informed by the current socio-political environment and is

networked in nature. I join Drakett and Kenny (2018) in their call for a collective response to collective hate. We must not only challenge hate in fandom spaces, but also ‘lone wolf’ rhetoric and critique the promotion of personalised solutions placing the onus of responsibility on individual women to manage their responses to abuse. I propose that we can no longer afford to maintain a strategy of silence (referred to online as ‘do not feed the trolls’) and instead come together to develop strategies with which to critique and challenge misogyny in fandom. Recently fans have been creating new hashtags such as #PositiveTrek to demonstrate solidarity and positivity in fandom, and similarly here I have created the hashtag #NotMyFandom to signal my rejection of reactionary fandom and reclaim fandom space from populist alt-right politics.

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