Incel violence as a new terrorism threat:
A brief investigation between Alt-Right and Manosphere dimensions

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Abstract:

Closely entwined, Alt-Right and Manosphere narratives have become more and more hostile and aggressive in recent years. The article is going to map the main features of these two phenomena, highlighting their common grounds and outlining their specific features. Particular attention is paid to the Manosphere, a constellation of online communities that share anti-feminist beliefs, with a special focus on the Involuntary Celibates (Incels) dimension. Indeed, nowadays Inceldom appears to be one of the most active Manosphere communities, as concrete physical attacks have been carried out by individuals linked to this environment. In this sense, the article tries to identify the reasons why these acts have been recently labelled as acts of terrorism and the implications this classification could have.

Keywords:

Alt-Right, Manosphere, Incel, hate, terrorism.

Resumen:

Estrechamente relacionadas, las narrativas de la derecha alternativa y de la androsfera se han vuelto cada vez más hostiles y agresivas en los últimos años. Este artículo traza un mapa de los principales rasgos de estos dos fenómenos, resaltando sus puntos en común y describiendo sus características distintivas. Prestamos especial atención a la Androsfera, una constelación de comunidades de Internet que comparten creencias antifeministas, y nos centramos en la dimensión Incel (Involuntary Celibates, célibes involuntarios). En efecto, hoy en día la comunidad incel parece ser una de las más activas de la Androsfera, ya que individuos concretos relacionados con aquélla han cometido ataques físicos. En este sentido, el artículo intenta identificar las razones por las que esos actos se han etiquetado como acciones terroristas, y la implicación que esa clasificación puede tener.

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1. INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING THE INCEL PHENOMENON

In order to understand the development and the spreading of the Incel phenomenon and, more generally, of the Manosphere dimension, it is necessary to spend a few words to illustrate the context in which these movements have arisen. In this respect, it is worth analysing the Alt-Right environment as a cradle of different forms of intolerant narratives, which include anti-feminist positions. Indeed, as it will be stressed throughout the paper, the two dimensions frequently overlap.

1.1. THE ALT-RIGHT: MAIN FEATURES

The Alternative Right (commonly referred to as "Alt-Right") could be described as a wide container of heterogeneous far-right positions which share some major traits.[1] First of all, it is mainly an online phenomenon: its members are active on popular social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, platforms, forums (e.g. Reddit and 4chan), where they typically resort to irony, trolling and memes based on the scorn of political correctness and moralism to convey their messages (Hawley 2017), in a way that they can be easily understood by the majority of people. In addition, many dedicated websites (e.g. Red Ice and Rebel Media) and specialised online magazines[2] have been founded over the years.

Shifting the focus on the contents spread, the Alt-Right appears to be strongly concerned by *race*, in this way showing a strong identity politics (Hawley 2017). This particular trait is well underlined by the definition elaborated by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC),[3] which defines the Alt-Right as

> a set of far-right ideologies, groups, and individuals whose core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces using 'political correctness' and 'social justice' to undermine white people and 'their' civilization.

Since they deem the destiny of the white Western civilization being under threat, Alt-Right members share a general hostile attitude towards immigration, which sometimes shifts into those conspiracy theories that claims that the white "race" would be slowly heading to its

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[1] The term "Alternative Right" appeared for the first time in 2008 in an article published in *Taki's Magazine* by Richard B. Spencer – founder of the National Policy Institute, a U.S. white supremacist organization – and spread later in 2010, when he launched the online magazine called "The Alternative Right".

[2] Alongside "AltRight.com" and "Taki's Magazine" (founded by Taki Theodoracopulos), other online magazines linked to the Alt-right are: "American Renaissance" (founded by Jared Taylor), "Counter Currents" (founded by Greg Johnson), "Radix Journal" (founded by Richard B. Spencer) and "The Right Stuff" (founded by Mike Peinovich).

[3] The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a non-profit organization based in Montgomery (U.S.). It defines itself as a "a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond, working in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance the human rights of all people" (https://www.splcenter.org/about)

complete substitution with other – inferior – "races".[4] Accordingly, they criticize low birth rates and mixed couples, which would contribute to the decline of the white "race". Linked to these concerns, the Alt-Right also questions the role of women in society. In this regard, it has been noted that the Alt-Right would promote the so-called *sex realism,* according to which "men and women have biological differences that make them suited to different social roles" (Hawley 2017). Moreover, while within far-right movements we would often find a mix of hostile and benevolent sexism (Glick and Fiske 1996, 1999, 2001), the alt-right would display a prevalent component of the latter (Mudde 2019), in this way considering women more as a threat than as in need of protection.[5] Therefore, even if both alt-right and other far-right movements supporters show anti-feminist beliefs and favour a patriarchal society, Alt-Right masculinity often appears to portray women in a particular antagonistic sense.

Given these characteristics, the Alt-Right entwines with the Manosphere, a term used to refer to various online groups which display anti-feminist positions.

2. MAPPING THE MANOSPHERE

Composed largely of men, Manosphere communities share a common sense of disorientation, oppression and frustration caused by the feeling that modern society does not recognize the role of men anymore, in so displaying the grievances linked to the claims of a crisis of masculinity (Copland 2020). They are traditionally identified in Men's Rights Activists, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Pick Up Artists (PUA), Fathers' Rights groups and Inceldom:

2.1. MEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

The birth of the Men's Rights Movement (MRM) can be traced back to the Men's Liberation Movement, which rose in parallel to second-wave feminism and fought alongside the liberation of women, claiming that both men and women were imprisoned in their sex roles. However, it took a different path starting from the 1980s: Men's Rights activists started to feel discriminated and began to blame women – namely feminism – for their situation, advocating for a restoration of traditional masculinity (Messner 1998, Coston and Kimmel 2013). Currently, the MRM refers to a variety of groups and individuals who believe that men are discriminated by modern Western society.[6]

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[4] Such as the "Great Replacement theory". For an overview: https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/the-great-replacement-an-explainer.

[5] On the correlation between sexism and conservative ideologies, studies have examined the relationship between hostile and benevolent sexism and right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, showing that while the first one would be more frequently associated to manifestations of hostile sexism, the latter would display a bigger component of benevolent sexism (Christopher and Mull 2006, Sibley *et al.* 2007). However, recent investigations brought more nuance to the matter, reporting benevolent sexism to have a stronger relationship with social dominance orientation than right-wing authoritarianism (Austin and Jackson 2019).

[6] The MRM "A Voice for Men" has been listed among the "2020 male supremacy hate groups" by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).

2.2. MEN GOING THEIR OWN WAY (MGTOW)

Although sharing the same feeling of discrimination as Men's Rights Activists, Men Going Their Own Way suggest a different solution: since they believe that in modern society there is no place for men, they state that it is time for them to "go on their own way", that is to say to divide their path from women, choosing abstinence from romantic relationships (Bates 2021). One of the first MGTOW Manifestos was published in 2001 on the online blog "No M'am".[7]

2.3. PICK UP ARTISTS (PUA)

Unlike MGTOW, Pick Un Artists strive to build contacts with women, and in order to do so they resort to a series of tricks, seduction games and flirting techniques. While some of the PUA communities are mainly supporting and reassuring insecure males, other communities appear to be more aggressive, morphing their flirting strategies into rape strategies (Bates 2021).

2.4. FATHERS' RIGHTS GROUPS

The members of the Fathers' Rights groups claim that fathers are systematically discriminated by family law: they complain about custody decisions in case of divorce, which they denounce to be always in favour of the mother. Anyway, while some of them just want to obtain a shared custody and to enjoy fatherhood, others shift to antifeminism and use an offensive language (Kimmel 2017).

2.5. INCELS (INVOLUNTARY CELIBATES)

The Incel community gathers males who feel rejected by women and, for this reason, have a strong sense of frustration caused by their situation of forced sexual abstinence.

According to a recent study (Horta Ribeiro *et al.* 2021) Men's Rights Activists and Pick Up Artists are decreasing in popularity, and many of their followers are shifting towards Men Going On Their Way and, especially, Incel communities, which are consistently growing and appear to be more toxic and misogynistic. Moreover, just like Alt-Right groups, Manosphere communities are an almost exclusively online phenomenon. Indeed, their members gather on the same platforms – such as Reddit and 4chan – and migration pathways from Manosphere towards Alt-Right communities has been assessed (Mamié *et al.* 2021). Acknowledging these trends, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has recently included male supremacy communities among hate groups, highlighting the connections between white supremacy and male supremacy, which are deemed to be both "driven by fear and anger at the loss of white male status".[8]

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[7] Available at the following link: http://no-maam.blogspot.com/2001/02/mgtow-manifesto.html

[8] "Male Supremacy", SPLC (available at: https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy). Moreover, the SPLC underlined that the connections between the Alt-Right and Manosphere can be also remarked by the fact that some Alt-Right personalities result to be involved in Manosphere groups, and likewise some Manosphere personalities are engaged in Alt-Right initiatives.

3. THE INCELDOM

The term Incel, which stands for "Involuntary Celibates", made its first online appearance in mid 1990s, when a Canadian student known as Alana created a website called "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project" to share her experience about sexual inactivity. While the purposes of the original website were inoffensive,[9] at present many Incel communities are characterised by an aggressive and misogynistic language, blaming bad genetics, society and in particular women for their situation of forced sexual abstinence.

3.1. INCELDOM'S NARRATIVES AND CATEGORIZATIONS

Incels (Involuntary Celibates) consistently use recurrent narratives to support, explain and reinforce their grievances – such as the "80:20 theory"[10] – and manifest a particular obsession for categorizations into strict stereotypes by means of a characteristic jargon. For instance, women who are attractive and sexually active are "Stacys", while their male counterparts are "Chads", who are the representation of the "Alpha male": handsome, rich and assertive. Looking closely at the language adopted when talking about women, the vocabulary used is degrading and tends to objectify them: Incels often refer to a woman as a "foid", which stands for "female humanoid organism" – followed by the pronoun "it" instead of "she" (Brzuszkiewicz 2020). This would result in a dehumanisation of women, who are accused of being all the same ("All Women Are Like That – AWALT") and considered unworthy of any compassion.

In addition, Incels themselves have developed a long list of self-labels, based on the the reasons why they believe they are rejected by women. For example, among Incels we can find "heightcels" (who consider themselves undesirable because they are short), "baldcels" (who blame their baldness), "fatcels" (who blame their obesity condition) and also "thincels" (who think they are too skinny to be attractive). Besides, some Incels deem their racial background to be the main reason why women are not attracted to them – calling themselves with terms such as "ricecels" (Asian roots) or "currycels" (Indian roots) and using the general term "ethnicels" – stating that women prefer white males ("Just Be White – JBW theory"). However, even if the use of these acronyms could suggest a sensibility towards racial discrimination, apparently these labels are mainly used by white Incels and can be held as symptomatic of racist beliefs about the superiority of white men (Bates 2021) – an attitude that reminds that one manifested by Alt-Right movements, as highlighted above (§ 1.1). Nevertheless, even if studies suggest Incel communities to be predominantly white, they would also display a significant percentage of users belonging to other ethnicities (Sugiura 2021).[11]

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[9] During an interview released to the BBC in 2018, Alana stated that: "There was probably a bit of anger and some men were a bit clueless about how women are unique, individual humans, but in general it was a supportive place" (Taylor 2018).

[10] Only the 20% of men – namely the most rich and attractive ones – would enjoy the 80% of the sex ("80:20 theory"), leaving the other men without a partner.

[11] In this respect, it has been remarked that Asian Americans men's rights subcultures are growing (Liu 2021).

4. "TAKING THE RED PILL" ARGUMENT

Borrowed from conspiracy theories and far-right subcultures,[12] the "Redpilling" metaphor holds a central role among Incel ideology – and among Manosphere narratives overall (Ging 2019). The term "Redpilling" is a reference to the movie *The Matrix*, where the main character must decide whether to take the "Blue pill" and continue to live in a world of reassuring illusions, or to take the "Red pill" and face the world as it really is. According to Incels, taking the "Red pill" consists in acknowledging the harsh truth, that is to say that success with women can only be achieved by possessing "Look, Money and Status" ("LMS theory"), as women are "shallow", "promiscuous" and only interested in wealth and good-looking men. After having assessed their unfortunate condition, some Incels try to abandon the Incel status – this is the case of the so-called "gymcels", who spend a lot of their free time in the gym to build muscles and an attractive body – while others choose to take the "Black pill". "Blackpilling" is the next stage of "Redpilling": after opening the eyes on the reality of things, taking the "Black pill" means accepting the bitter reality as an unchangeable condition. This sheds a light on another peculiarity of the Incel narrative, that is the perceived victimization of the Incels' condition, which is associated with self-loathing and self-pity.[13] Indeed, Incels narratives would exacerbate common human experiences – such as romantic rejection – portraying them as an unchangeable negative condition that would affect Incels only (Sugiura 2021), amplifying the connected feelings of frustration and humiliation. This particular victim mentality has been held as a clear symptom of the fact that Inceldom is characterised by a predominantly external locus of control, that is to say that Incels would promote a fatalist vision, believing that life is guided by external events on which they have no control over. As noticed, this element could facilitate the progressive loss of one's sense of responsibility, removing some barriers to antisocial behaviour and radicalisation (Brzuszkiewicz 2020).

Some Incels, indeed, have incited to the "Incel Rebellion", which has led to concrete violent attacks against women and has called for international attention to the Incel phenomenon.

5. FROM ONLINE HATE TO PHYSICAL VIOLENCE: RECENT INCEL ATTACKS

In recent years, the line between virtual and physical violence has been crossed, and some attacks have been recorded. While some of the perpetrators were directly or indirectly affiliated to Incel communities and to the Manosphere dimension, others seemed to be more attached to the far-right and alt-right framework, although they supported misogynistic and anti-feminist viewpoints, thus confirming the influences between the two movements. In addition, it has been noticed that, just like in many cases of far-right terrorist attacks, some of the perpetrators linked to the Inceldom were once members of the military (Hoffman *et al.* 2020).

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[12] The "Redpilling" argument is typically used to claim that we would be living in an illusionary world full of lies that the Powers That Be (e.g. governments) want us to believe in.

[13] Besides, this can be right away inferred by the term Incel itself, that stands for *Involuntary* Celibates and it is coherent with their sense of frustration and victimization. In this sense, we can appreciate the difference between Incels and MGTOW members, who are *Voluntary* Celibates (Volcels).

With the aim to offer an understanding of this phenomenon, we are going to map the most severe attacks that have been carried out.

5.1. NORTH AMERICA

The first attack linked to the Incel subculture took place in Isla Vista (California) in 2014, when the 22-year-old Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen others, and then killed himself. The day before the attack, whose target was a sorority of the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) – where he used to study – Rodger uploaded a video on Youtube called *Elliot Rodger's Retribution*, in which he referred to himself as the "supreme gentleman" and explained that on the "Day of Retribution" he would have had his revenge for being condemned to loneliness (Bates 2021). He also wrote a long document, titled *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger*, a kind of autobiography where he explains his hatred against women and his frustration for not being able to engage in a romantic relationship:

> All I ever wanted was to love women, and in turn to be loved by them back. Their behavior towards me has only earned my hatred, and rightfully so! I am the true victim in all of this. I am the good guy. (Rodger 2014)

The Incel community praised his deeds (BBC News 2018), which inspired other Incel attackers, like Christopher Harper-Mercer, a 26-year-old student at the Umpqua Community College (Roseburg, Oregon), who on 1 October 2015, killed an assistant professor and eight students, while leaving others injured, and then killed himself. Apparently, Harper-Mercer was active on online platforms and shared misogynistic and white supremacist beliefs on, among others, Incel forums (Incident summary 2015) and he explicitly commended Rodger in his manifesto (Harper Mercer 2015), stating that "Elliot is a god". Similarly, three years later another young male, Alek Minassian, carried out a van attack in Toronto (Canada) which resulted in the death of ten people and in the injury of sixteen others. Before the attack, Minassian had posted a statement on his Facebook account, in which he stated that "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!" (Madhani and Bacon 2018).

The most recent Incel attack occurred in North America took place in 2020, when a 17-year-old entered in a spa in Toronto (Canada) and stabbed three people, killing one of them. This attack is particularly interesting for the criminal qualification it has been given. Indeed, while at the beginning the police arrested and charged the perpetrator for first degree murder and attempted murder, at a later time the Toronto Police Service and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police released a joint statement adding "terrorist activity" to the previous two charges, stating that "this crime was in fact one in which the accused was inspired by the Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremist (IMVE) movement commonly known as INCEL" and reminding the population that "terrorism comes in many forms and it's important to note that it is not restricted to any particular group, religion or ideology" (Toronto Police Service and Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2020).

5.2. EUROPE

Attacks linked to Inceldom have been reported also in Europe, namely in the United Kingdom and in Germany. The first one was registered in Portsmouth (UK), where the 18-year-old Ben Moynihan tried to kill three women by stabbing them in different occasions in 2014. During the investigations, the police found a note in which Moynihan stated that "all women need to die", and some letters in which he motivated his deeds by the frustration of still being a virgin (BBC 2015). The latest attack took place on 12 August 2021, when the 22-year-old Jake Davison killed five people, including his mother and a three-year old child, and then killed himself in the Keyham area of Plymouth (UK). Apparently, Davison was involved in Incel communities and posted misogynistic messages online (The Week staff 2021).

With regards to Germany, the attacks recorded seems to present a stronger link to far-right ideologies, mixing racist issues with misogynistic beliefs. This is the case of the 27-year-old Stephan Balliet who, in 2018, headed to the synagogue in the Paulusviertel neighbourhood of Halle (Germany) on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, willing to shoot people in pray; even if he failed at his purpose, he killed two people. Both in the livestream video recorded during the attack and in his manifesto, in addition to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and white supremacism, Balliet used some self-loathing terms, such as "loser", and displayed strong ant-feminist views, which linked him to Inceldom (Koehler 2019). The following year, the 43-year-old Tobias Rathjen carried out two shootings in a bar in Hanau and in a bar in Kesselstadt, which resulted in the death of nine people and, when he got back home, he shot his mother and then killed himself. His online manifesto contained racist xenophobic views, as well as frustration for never having been in a romantic relationship with a woman (Jasser *et al.* 2020).

6. INCEL ATTACKS: A NEW FORM OF TERRORISM?

The framework of these heinous attacks only shows how Incel communities can represent a concrete vehicle to violence. As abovementioned, the Canadian police explicitly classified an Incel attack – namely the one that took place in Toronto in 2020 - as "terrorist activity". This path has been followed by the Department of Public Safety of Texas, which in the *2020 Texas Domestic Terrorism Threat Assessment* (Texas Department of Public Safety 2020) has included Incels among the emergent domestic terrorism threats:

> Although not a new movement, Involuntary Celibates (Incels) are an emerging domestic terrorism threat as current adherents demonstrate marked acts or threats of violence in furtherance of their social grievance. Once viewed as a criminal threat by many law enforcement authorities, Incels are now seen as a growing domestic terrorism concern due to the ideological nature of recent Incel attacks internationally, nationwide, and in Texas. What begins as a personal grievance due to perceived rejection by women may morph into allegiance to, and attempts to further, an Incel Rebellion. The result has thrust the Incel movement into the realm of domestic terrorism. The violence demonstrated by Incels in the past decade, coupled with extremely violent online rhetoric, suggests this particular threat could soon match, or potentially eclipse, the level of lethalness demonstrated by other domestic terrorism types.

Consistently, at the federal level the 2021 *US National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism* labelled the Involuntary Celibates as a threat to public security, including them among the forms of violent extremism that can lead to terrorist attacks (National Security Council 2021). Incel violence has been taken in serious account also in Europe, to the point that the *2021 European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* (TESAT) issued by Europol (2021), classified Incel as terrorism threat. More precisely, the report associates Incel communities to those "narratives and conspiracy theories with potential to incite violence", which are considered to belong to the right-wing terrorism, in this way highlighting the connection between the two phenomena once again. Moreover, Incel violence has been noted as a manifestation of terrorism also by the *Report of the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation on the Operation of the Terrorism Acts 2000 and 2006* presented to the UK Parliament in March 2021, which included Incel attacks under the "novel cause terrorism" category (Hall 2021).

6.1. TERRORISM: A RELATIVE CONCEPT

For decades scholars have struggled to formulate a unique and shared definition of terrorism, but the quest has not been fruitful.[14] Defining someone as terrorist is substantially a political choice:[15] what is clear, however, is that the "terrorist" label implies a negative judgement (Hoffman 2017, 24), that is to say that it targets the person as an enemy of the shared values and political grounds of a given society. The fluidity and the vagueness of terrorism can be also seized when looking at its transformation across history: while its origins are traditionally traced back to the Sicarii and to the Assassins, terrorism acquired a completely different dimension under Robespierre's Reign of Terror, where the enemies of the Revolution were publicly executed (Benigno 2018). Since then, modern terrorism took different forms, aiming at different targets, employing different tactics and developing new forms of organization.[16]

Nevertheless, some of its typical features can be outlined. Modern terrorism can be described as a "deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change", which is "specifically designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victim(s) or object of the terrorist attack" (Hoffman 2017, 44). Hence, terrorists use violence to generate fear among a specific target group in order to change the existing political and/or social order. More precisely, the victims of the violence can be both accurately chosen (e.g. politicians, diplomats etc.) or casually chosen (e.g. attacks on public transports), still it is essential that the attack manages to convey a specific message. Indeed, persuasion and coercion are both key aspects of terrorism.

6.2. INCELS' TERRORISM

Bearing in mind the distinctive traits of terrorism, we can now examine how Incel attackers would integrate these elements. Certainly, they display a concrete level of violence, yet they

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[14] For an overview of the definitions of terrorism: Easson and Schimd (2011).

[15] To stress this point, the popular expression "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" can be here recalled.

[16] According to Rapoport (2013), modern terrorism can be divided into four waves: the Anarchist Wave (1880-1920), the Anti-Colonial Wave (1920-1960 ca.), the New-Left Wave (1960-2000 ca.) and the Religious Wave (1929-today).

do not appear to be motivated by the desire of a political change: Incels seem to be driven by personal revenge, rather than a political vision. Nonetheless, some scholars suggest that Incel violence should anyway be treated as an emergent terrorism threat, as "its core ethos revolves around the subjugation and repression of a group and its violence is designed to have far-reaching societal effects" (Hoffman *et al.* 2020). Indeed, even if Incels' aim is not directly linked to a political revolution, their resentment is targeted to the structure of modern society, which they feel to be unfair and biased in favour of women and "Alpha males". Thus, Incel terrorism would be driven by a strong hate element, that would play an essential role in the dynamics and motivations of Incel attacks (Hoffman *et al.* 2020). As a matter of fact, according to some scholars hate crimes and terrorism could be considered as "close cousins", considering that "the effect of both terrorism and hate crimes is to wreak terror in a greater number of people than those directly affected by the violence" (Krueger and Malečková 2003). However, the two phenomena present some differences, such as the fact that hate crimes would be often carried out by powerful groups against minorities, contrary to terrorism, which usually involves minorities that aim to change the *status quo.* With regards to Incels, it could be argued that the fact that they perceive themselves as victims, at the same time excluded from society and at its lowest level (Witt 2020) – a feeling that, by the way, is remarked by the use of expressions such as "Incels' Rebellion" and "Incels' Uprising" – could link them to that sense of injustice and revenge that characterise and motivates terrorist attacks.[17]

6.3 APPLICABILITY OF COUNTER-TERRORISM POLICIES TO INCELS

To qualify Incel violence as a new terrorism threat, means to resort to the application of counter-terrorism measures. Notoriously, terrorism legislation framework has been specifically built on the wake of the War on Terror, started in response of the 09/11 attack, and is characterised by a clear pre-emptive approach (Stampnitzky 2013, 165-186), which sacrifices personal rights and prerogatives in the name of national security. Although governments' security narratives already proved to struggle to tackle different phenomena than those linked to Islamic terrorism – namely far-right terrorism (Kundnani 2012a), it is worth to try to assess how these measures could apply to Incels. Actually, some similarities between Incel phenomenon and terrorist dynamics can be spotted.

First of all, Incels exploit the opportunities given by Internet, like extremist Islamic groups (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai 2017) and far-right groups (Ahmed and Pisoiu 2019): indeed, the web has now become "a primary operational environment, in which political ideologies are realized, attacks planned, and social movements made" (Winter *et al.* 2020).

Moreover, whilst they are very active, Incel groups do not integrate hierarchical organisations, yet they would serve more as communities where narratives are shared and grievances reinforced. Linked to this aspect, Incels act as lone actors, motivated only by the ideology they conform to and plan their attack without the support of a structured organisation, a trend that we find also with regards to the recent Islamic terrorist and far-right attacks.

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[17] For a comprehensive overview of the similarities and the differences between hate crimes and terrorism: Mills *et al.* 2017.

The fluidity of the Incel network could take on great importance, as the fluidity of Islamic terrorist organisations – which after the 09/11 progressively abandoned traditional hierarchical structures in favour of more fluid social networks – has served as justification for resort to mass surveillance practices aimed at detecting the spread of "extremist ideas" and to notice changes in peoples' behaviours that could be symptomatic of the adhesion to terrorism affiliated groups (Kundnani 2012b). Hence, the same arguments could be used to employ the same practices to the members of Incel communities, potentially significantly broadening their scope of action. This aspect allows us to stress once again the notorious problem of securitisation policies, that is to say the struggle to find the right balance between the protection of national and public security and the safeguard of individual rights, such as freedom of expression and privacy. Furthermore, the current pandemic context has illustrated the weaknesses of the policies adopted so far, as these platforms have been constantly growing: pushed by feelings of uncertainty, fear and isolation, people have embraced more extreme contents and have joined conspiracy theories.[18]

Counter-terrorism policies, indeed, are struggling to tackle the phenomenon of online extremism. If on one hand governments are trying to implement effective legislative frameworks with the aim to prevent and detect violent and abusive speech, on the other hand social media companies are trying to contain and control the manifestations of hate on their platforms, both establishing specific policy guidelines[19] and developing algorithms intending to prevent and block dangerous contents.[20] Unfortunately, these attempts are not turning out to be flawless: while some studies suggest that algorithms could be racially biased (Sap *et al.* 2019), others point out that instead of tackling hate speech, some algorithms push users towards more and more extreme contents, eventually enhancing their radicalisation (Horta Ribeiro *et al.* 2020). Aside from the effectiveness of these tools, however, some questions on the opportunity to leave a great part to self-regulation of private companies could be posed, as public and private interests could not always correspond. In addition, it has been pointed out that while the legislative framework is focusing its attention to the biggest social media companies, it should take into account also the smaller platforms, which, even if are visited by a small number of users, could present an attractive gateway for terrorists, as the biggest ones become more and more restrictive (Bishop and Macdonald 2019).

7. CONCLUSIONS

Both Alt-Right and the Manosphere communities are expressions of a generalized unsatisfaction, frustration and disorientation. The two phenomena present multiple intersections, such as the massive online presence, the misogynistic and sexist beliefs and the offensive and abusive language.

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[18] For a deeper analysis on the impact of COVID-19: Marone 2021.

[19] This is the case of Facebook, which has recently implemented a "Transparency Centre" that provides a hate speech policy with specific guidelines aimed at tackling intimidating and offensive speech (Transparency Center 2022).

[20] With regards to the manosphere dimension, the MGTOW subreddit r/MGTOW has been recently banned for inciting violence and promoting hate (Thalen 2021). Besides, since 2015 Reddit has implemented a so-called quarantine policy for its most controversial subreddits, which make them less visible (Reddit 2021).

As further proof of these overlaps, some Incel-influenced attackers displayed clear racist and xenophobic views – traditional of far-right movements – along with Incels' typical narratives.

Indeed, by shaping and reinforcing grievances, Incel communities have been proved to serve as fertile environment for grooming and radicalisation of their users, leading some of them to carry out physical attacks which could be labelled as terrorism.

Even if this qualification could be justified on the basis of the similarities among Incels' dynamics and terrorists' ones, the application of the classical counter-terrorism measures could have disappointing results. Incels, indeed, present some peculiarities that would require a broader approach, based on a deep understanding of the roots of Incel narratives in order to develop specific counter-narratives. In this sense, it has been insightfully remarked that, while for other forms of terrorism societies appear to unequivocally condemn not only the attack itself, but also the ideological roots at the basis of it, the grounds of Incel ideology appears to be in some way confirmed by the society we live in, as gender inequality and sexism are still widespread and, to some extent, still socially accepted (Leidig 2021). For this reason, de-radicalisation processes could present particular challenges that should be specifically addressed.

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