Counterspace

Castration, the archive, and the incel wiki

Julia R. DeCook⊙

School of Communication, Loyola University Chicago, 51 E. Pearson Street, Chicago, IL 60611, USA.
E-mail: jdecook@luc.edu

Abstract   In recent years, the incel community has been the subject of much scholarly and public fascination due to its violent and spectacular misogyny, which has resulted in acts of mass violence. In this essay, I argue that the incel psyche can best be understood through a reading of the incel wiki, which was established after a large incel community on Reddit was banned. During the ban, all of the content was lost, and in an attempt to regain their power a group of users created a wiki as a collaborative knowledge repository and archive. I argue that this archive not only serves as a way of reclaiming power via the process of embracing the incels' symbolic castration but reveals the social epistemology of the group, as well as their shared fantasies, by creating an imaginary order. As a collaborative knowledge space and archive, the wiki allows for the sublimation of incel desire.

Incels (a portmanteau of "involuntary celibates") are a misogynistic online subculture that often celebrates and calls for violence against women, entered the public discourse when Elliot Rodger committed a mass murder in Isla Vista, California, in 2014 (Dewey, 2014; Futrelle, 2018). However, in recent years, with additional murders attributed to men who identified as incels and the rise of the alt-right and Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) in general (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018), incels have become the object of intense scrutiny and also morbid fascination. Although topologized as

being a part of the greater "Manosphere,"[1] incels have a unique and often antagonistic ideology and discourse that often does not fit with the beliefs held by other MRA groups nor by pickup artist (PUA) communities. Not relegated to a single forum, political ideology, or even definition of what constitutes an incel, what binds these seemingly disparate communities is an ideology they refer to as the "Black Pill."

An evolution of the "Red Pill," the Black Pill embraces biological determinism and fatalism at its core: i.e., while the Red Pill helps men wake up to the reality of the "sexual marketplace" and gives them the tools to navigate it, the Black Pill is another (extreme) level of consciousness, claiming that there is no hope and that one's incel status is permanent. Specifically, the Black Pill advocates for a fatalistic view of the world wherein there is no way for men – "ethnic" (i.e., non-white) incels in particular – to achieve romantic or sexual satisfaction or happy long-term relationships due to hard scientific evidence explaining the contrary. Incels who adhere to the Black Pill, unlike their other Manosphere counterparts, do not even try to embrace self-improvement or the pursuit of romantic/sexual romantic relationships but rather try and understand the world through this deterministic, fatalistic lens. One of the most prominent and popular incel web forums, incels.co, emerged from the banned subreddit r/incels, the largest incels community on Reddit. The moderators of the new incels.co forum then took steps to create collections of readings that they named "the Black Pill Archives," eventually establishing the incels' wiki in response to what they perceived were poor definitions and representations of their group via more mainstream channels.

This essay is a psychoanalytic reading of the incel wiki. In it, I argue that incel ideology can best be understood through a reading of their wiki as an archive that not only presents their "official" narrative and beliefs but is meant to act as a means of preserving the group's content and standardizing their ideology. Primarily, this reading is done through the psychoanalytic lens of Lacanian symbolic and imaginary castration (Lacan, 2013). Rather than unpacking the minutiae of the entries themselves, this essay aims to examine how the acts of archiving and collaborative construction of knowledge build incel realities and how these acts acknowledge and name their fear of castration. By using Internet spaces like forums, wikis, and instant messaging services, incels manage to escape into a world that temporarily sublimates their desire for power over women and non-incel men, and their destruction, by justifying their beliefs.

Taking the Black Pill: Wikis and Knowledge Infrastructure

Wikis are collaborative knowledge management tools which allow for users to structure content according to their needs. Wikis are distinct from blogs and other text-based sites because they exist without singular ownership (Ford, 2015; Grace, 2009). Reading wikis as a kind of archive along the grain as

opposed to against it reveals much about the desires, fears, anxieties, and world views of the groups that create them (Stoler, 2002). Interpreting wikis as archives means that scholars should not view them as merely places of data extraction but rather as ethnographic field sites with their own relations, interactions, and discourses (Stoler, 2002, 2008). By looking at wikis as spaces that create and recreate discursive formations, we are able to unpack more about the nature of incel ideology and beliefs. Notably, unlike forums, wikis are specifically meant to function as collaborative and participatory *knowledge* resources and thus contain different kinds of content, standardization procedures, and protocols. Conversations do not occur in "real-time" like forums or other social media pages but rather are carefully constructed and edited by a handful of users. The preserved entries, however, are simultaneously "new" (i.e., the wiki did not exist before and thus required content) and "old." This is due to an event that saw the shutdown of the incels' subreddit, to which many users of incels.co (the incel forum which runs the wiki) migrated.

When the largest incels' subreddit, r/incels, was shut down, many users lamented that all of the knowledge that had been gathered was lost due to the lack of a formal system for preserving that content, i.e. a lack of archivization, which may explain the emergence and establishment of the wiki. Thus, the wiki doesn't just serve as an archive but also as a space for incels to engage in a certain level of self-representation and definition by incels for other incels. Although wikis don't typically contain archival materials, the function of the incel wiki is not just a group resource but also a means of preventing the total loss of meaningful content which occurred with the shutdown of the r/incels' subreddit. Thus, the wiki not only establishes a baseline group ideology to provide a means of socialization into the group at scale but represents the social epistemologies of the group (Stoler, 2002). The role of technology in changing the form and structure of an archive cannot be ignored, particularly in the realm of the digital, and the contents of the archive cannot live outside of what it preserves (Derrida, 1998).

By harnessing the power of the Internet and World Wide Web in creating this resource, incels are able to regain some level of male power and to assuage their anxiety, even temporarily, through the creation of knowledge and establishment of an archive. Thus, the wiki's infrastructure allows for the collective editing of entries but also for the entries to be connected to others, forming an entire world of their own that represents the incel community and psyche in a different way than their forums. However, the function of the wiki also differs from that of the forums, serving as a supporting environment for imaginary castration.

The Castrated Incel

Reading the wiki entries through the lens of castration reveals much about the intrapsychic conflict that occurs within the mind of the incel. Castration is more

than just a fear and anxiety about symbolic (figurative) and physical (literal) removal of the sexual organs; it is also the anxiety present in the fear of bodily invasion (Freud, 1917/1955; Rangell, 1991). From a Freudian angle, castration operates as a fear of the removal of the sexual organs by another man (i.e., the father), but also the possibility of losing their *function* (Freud, 1917/1955).

However, Lacan expanded upon Freudian castration by positing that castration is the symbolic lack of an imaginary object and linked to frustration and deprivation. More importantly, castration's effect as a signifier makes itself known through language and signifies an imaginary phallus as opposed to a "real" phallus (Lacan, 2007). According to Lacan, we are all symbolically castrated, incel or not. Symbolic castration is achieved through feelings of domination, insignificance, and/or inadequacy; in the case of incels, of failing to live up to societal ideals of masculinity and manhood – i.e., symbolic, cultural constructions (Taylor, 2002). However, an important distinction in Lacanian castration is that castration is not the cause of a subject's anxiety but rather can be liberating through its acknowledgement. For the incel, fear of castration is what is embraced and organized around by their identifying with the incel group. By surrendering *jouissance* due to a lack of appropriate language in describing its fears, the incel community continually attempts to find explanations and vocabulary to describe its predicament via its forums and wiki. When analyzing these platforms – taking into consideration that the incel is thereby embracing their incel identity and therefore acknowledging their symbolic castration – the wiki serves as a liberating space filled with definitions, explanations, and entries that explain and justify incel discourses. In a post announcing the incels' wiki, a moderator of the incels.co forum invites people to write content about the "Incelosphere":

> Our wiki is now 100% functional. We're looking for people to write content about the incelosphere for our wiki page. Everyone is allowed to make edits right now, but every edit has to be approved by an administrator. If you're interested, PM me and I'll be able to create you an account and that will bypass the approval process.
> Let's show ((((wikipedia)))) how to do a **real, fact-based** wiki.
> This is the link to our wiki: http:///wiki.incels.info (HELP WANTED: Incel wiki editors).[2]

The function of the wiki seems to be twofold: not only to house "knowledge" for the incel community but also to respond to what incel members feel are inaccurate portrayals of their community on the official Wikipedia entry for incels and other related entries. Note also the use of the parentheses or "echo" around "Wikipedia," which are often used as an anti-Semitic code (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). Not surprisingly, responses to this post included members of the forum blaming feminism for the information about incels in the

Wikipedia entry and celebrating the wiki as a space where they would be able to write about the "Incelosphere" without the "influence" of feminists and "normies" (i.e., "normal people"), all of whom they believe are part of a larger conspiracy to paint incels in a bad light.

However, the incels' wiki is not just meant to "correct" what the community members view as disinformation about their group being spread by nefarious actors (namely, Jews, "globalists," and feminists, among others) but also to present what they believe is the "truth." In the current era of "post-truth" and "fake news," the incel rejection of the mainstream sources of knowledge not only supports and adds to this larger cultural shift but also adds to it via the wiki. As an official source of knowledge that justifies the incels' frustration and allows them to represent themselves in their own words, the wiki provides outlets for an embrace of their symbolic castration, liberating them from their anxiety and uncertainty. In the wiki, everything is explained, therefore nothing is uncertain, and it provides a more clearly defined and understandable reality. The wiki not only contains general knowledge and information (e.g., a "history" of the incel community) but also helps to contain the pain of castration by means of entries that attempt to provide explanations for inceldom or propose (deeply misogynistic) solutions. The motivation behind the formation of the wiki itself is one based on a need for power over knowledge, as referenced by the moderator post cited earlier in this essay. Indeed, this need for power is also present among regular forum users. For example, a response to a post from a user stated "I have been waiting for something like this for a long time," with another stating "It is my mission to get my own article and earn my place in the history of incel lore."

The above user's stated goal of writing an article to earn a "place in the history of incel lore" points to how the wiki entries themselves (as an archive) create imaginary knowledge. The wiki creates these fantasy images of the incel and, by aiming to create a resource that is a counterpart to other "official" mainstream narratives, establishes an imaginary order by allowing the incel to feel a sense of self-mastery not only via defining themselves but intensifying their distinctiveness (and thereby their narcissism), further alienating them from the Other (i.e., "normies") (Lacan, 2013). Thus, the wiki serves multiple purposes for the formation of the incel psyche. By acknowledging their fear of castration, incels' self-identification and representation are achieved through the entries that they create and preserve within the wiki. As such, the wiki allows other readers to engage in a similar loss of the Other – the Other in this situation meaning not just Stacys, Beckys, and Chads, but all "normies" in mainstream society. By positioning themselves as unique and "different" from this Other, incels use the wiki as a means of providing evidence of their difference and, in some cases, superiority (due to being "enlightened" by the Black Pill). The control of knowledge made possible via the wiki – and the outlet of presenting alternative narratives to a mainstream society they see as

antagonistic to their group – gives them access to a source of power by allowing the incels who create, edit, and maintain the wiki to both symbolically and physically determine the discourse and language that circulate about them. For incels, in this way, the wiki allows them to break free from their perceived physical and social limits and create themselves anew as subjects but without necessarily creating "different" symbolic relations. Rather, they use their wiki to recreate themselves in the symbolic relations that ground male supremacism and cisheteropatriarchy.

Thus, as both a "physical" digital object and symbolic world, the incel wiki blurs the line between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality. With its somewhat "official" status as an archive and source of incel cultural knowledge, the wiki allows for self-idolization and permits the incel (whether or not they are the creator of the content themselves) to be the central figure, satisfying egoic needs for self-idolization. In the current era of post-truth and mediated constructions of reality, the wiki functions as a rationalizing mechanism of the incel fantasy to create knowledge and provide evidence for their claims – and, most importantly, to provide a repository of knowledge to solidify their difference from non-incels. The fantasy functions in the wiki as an expression of the incel's desire, a defense mechanism, while the wiki's anonymity as part of cyberspace (Marzi, 2016) allows for an uninhibited view into the incel psyche. The wiki itself is a manifestation of the incel's desire for control and power in crafting their own narrative and embracing their inceldom.[3]

These shared fantasies and desires, allied to incels' shared anxieties, form the social epistemologies of the community (Stoler, 2002), revealing how the wiki connects them all together. Although previous scholars have pointed to neoliberalism's failures as an explanation for this rise in networked misogyny (Bratich and Banet-Weiser, 2019), inceldom is by no means a recent phenomenon. Examples of inceldom exist throughout history, before neoliberalism and postmodernity became the defining conditions of our social realities. However, perhaps in response to neoliberalism and the pressures of modern culture (much like the *hikikomori* in Japan), their misogyny is not just a fundamental component of their ideology and their main organizing principle but also manifests in a simultaneous rage and apathy toward society in their attempt to purge themselves of the fear and emasculation they perceive. As such, they aim to punish not just women but everyone who is not an incel.

Digital Sublimation and Revolt Against Society

In a way, incels are achieving a form of sublimation through transferring their frustrations and impulses by creating a knowledge repository that then gives its users immediate validation without the need for a higher level of introspection. By building the wiki and adding to it – and through reading it and being able to

cite it, search it, and even contribute to it – incels channel their fear and rage in a direction that temporarily gives them relief via an embrace of their incel identity and symbolic castration as a result. In a post that noted the poor representation of incels in the official incel Wikipedia entry, a user noted that the only way to fix these representations was to "find a way to bury the incel Wikipedia article in SEO legally" and to be careful about the posts that incel users make on the forum itself, due to the perceptions that the forum will create about "all male virgins":

> Keep in mind that the posts you make on this forum are important and will now unfortunately reflect on all male virgins. Serge seems to very much want this site to be the #1 forum based on his edits to the incel wiki linked on the top […] so if this forum will remain the most influential forum, the culture of this forum is going to continue to have downstream effects on all male virgins, the posts on this forum need to be more thought out.

This post specifying "male virgins" as distinct from incels is also an interesting example of the tension between embracing incel identity (and therefore castration) and those who have not yet (or never will) identified with the incel community ("all male virgins"). The poster not only notes the inaccuracies within the Wikipedia entry on incels (specifically, the English language one) but is concerned about the forum as a whole standing in for the ideology and beliefs of all male virgins. In a way, however, the wiki is a double-edged sword – although it explicitly tells contributors to not advocate for violence (which is also a forum rule that is inconsistently applied), the rage that they may have felt in coming across the resource may not only find a temporary relief but also a renewed and strengthened hatred. Through the wiki, incels now not only have affirmation of the reasons they suspected for their incel (or "male virgin," as the poster differentiates) status but also resources that "prove" their own castration – thus, they embrace their castration via these explanations and rationalizations presented through the wiki discourses. This raises the question: Does the wiki act as a form of emotional containment (Elliott and Urry, 2010) or serve as a validating and comforting space that leaves forum users more likely to be manipulated into a violent, misogynistic ideology?

The forum fulfills a need and desire for community, kinship, and belonging; but still leaves large gaps between the incel subject and the physical, digital worlds that they inhabit (Krzych, 2013). The incel wiki fills in many of these gaps by demonstrating the ways that an incel's castration has both social and symbolic explanations. The tension that exists in the incel's mind is then negotiated through readings and easy access to this wiki and provides validation for their rage. This rage, however, is not only directed towards women but also toward modern society at large: many incels embrace the NEET lifestyle (Not Employed, in Education, or Training)[4] as a way of revolting against the

"normal" world. Similar to the *hikikomori*, the anxiety around being unable to successfully have relationships, pursue careers, and live in the modern world drives many of these men to living in utter seclusion (Saito, 2013).

Of course, not all NEETs are incels and not all incels are NEETs. However, the wiki entries demonstrate an extreme cynicism toward the modern world not just in terms of an incel's inability to have sexual and romantic relationships but to be successful in any sector of modern society at all. The entries also point to the failures of postmodern anomic (e.g., individualized, morally non-guiding) society due to a loss of "grand narratives" that held society together, with the entries identifying the loss of religion as a factor in the rise of inceldom, as well as hyper-individualism. According to the incel wiki, embracing the NEET lifestyle as well as the Black Pill provides a way out of a perpetual state of fear and anxiety and removes the incel from participating further in a "degenerate" society. In this way, the wiki is a space to justify incels' revolt against mainstream society and the world.

As an archive, the wiki gives incels the collective and argumentative basis upon which they can justify their beliefs, lifestyles, and attitudes. Harnessing the power of the Internet, incels engage in modes of cultural preservation and production that were once entrusted only to official institutions (De Kosnik, 2016). This archive doesn't so much negate their fear of castration as acknowledge and embrace their symbolic castration, and by creating these knowledge repositories and establishing their own connections and relations, incels can regain some kind of power and redefine themselves as subjects (Lacan, 2013). Through this lessened anxiety and better self-representation, their image is controlled in terms of defining who and what an incel is, what the causes are, and explicating the Black Pill as well as its basis in "science." Reading the wiki not just as an archive but a fantasy, we not only see what incels' collective desires are but their collective *un*desires, turning them into a collective group bound together by this fantastic discourse.

Declarations

Conflict of interest   The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

About the Author

Julia R. DeCook is an Assistant Professor of Advocacy and Social Change in the School of Communication at Loyola University Chicago. Her research examines how online hate groups navigate the affordances and constraints of digital infrastructure to understand their persistence.

Notes

1. The "Manosphere" is a term used to refer to a loosely connected online network of men's rights groups, pick-up artists, and other male supremacist-oriented digital subcultures and movements (Futrelle, 2017).
2. To avoid engaging in "deviance amplification," (A Dictionary of Sociology, n.d.) I have chosen to not include the usernames, titles, or links to these posts.
3. To state it explicitly, one must be aware when consuming these materials that these are entries written by incels, for incels and curious onlookers, allowing them to shape their own narratives and representation and therefore the future of their group.
4. First used in the United Kingdom in a report about youth unemployment, the term has come to be used in a variety of different countries and Internet subcultures.

References

A Dictionary of Sociology. (n.d.) *Deviance amplification*. Oxford Reference. https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095714365#, accessed 20 August 2020.

Anti-Defamation League (n.d.) Echo. https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/echo, accessed 21 August 2020.

Bratich, J. & Banet-Weiser, S. (2019) From pick-up artists to incels: Con(fidence) games, networked misogyny, and the failure of neoliberalism. *International Journal of Communication* 13: 1–25.

De Kosnik, A. (2016) *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Derrida, J. (1998) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by E. Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dewey, C. (2014) Inside the 'manosphere' that inspired Santa Barbara shooter Elliot Rodger. *The Washington Post*. 27 May. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/05/27/inside-the-manosphere-that-inspired-santa-barbara-shooter-elliot-rodger/, accessed 2 April 2020.

Elliott, A. & Urry, J. (2010) *Mobile Lives*. New York: Routledge.

Ford, H. (2015) Fact factories: Wikipedia and the power to represent. PhD thesis. University of Oxford, Oxford.

Freud, S. (1917/1955) From the History of An Infantile Neurosis. *Standard Edition* 17. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 3–103.

Futrelle, D. (2017) Men's-rights activism is the gateway drug for the alt-right. *The Cut*. 17 August. https://www.thecut.com/2017/08/mens-rights-activism-is-the-gateway-drug-for-the-alt-right.html, accessed 10 September 2020.

Futrelle, D. (2018) When a mass murderer has a cult following. *The Cut*. 27 April. https://www.thecut.com/2018/04/incel-meaning-rebellion-alex-minassian-elliot-rodger-reddit.html, accessed 27 August 2020.

Grace, T.P.L. (2009) Wikis as a knowledge management tool. *Journal of Knowledge Management* 13(4): 64–74.

Krzych, S. (2013) Introduction to special section on the digital subject. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 18(1): 56–62.

Lacan, J. (2007) *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated by B. Fink. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Lacan, J. (2013) The symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. In: *On the Names-of-the-Father*. Translated by B. Fink. Malden: Polity, pp. 1–52.

Marzi, A. (ed.) (2016) *Psychoanalysis, Identity, and the Internet: Explorations into Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge.

Rangell, L. (1991) Castration. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 39(1): 3–23.

Saito, T. (2013) *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End*. Translated by J. Angles. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Southern Poverty Law Center (2018) Weekend read: For incels, it's not about sex. It's about women. 4 May. https://www.splcenter.org/news/2018/05/04/weekend-read-incels-its-not-about-sex-its-about-women, accessed 1 November 2020.

Stoler, A.L. (2002) Colonial archives and the arts of governance: On the content in the form. In: C. Hamilton, V. Harris, J. Taylor, M. Pickover, G. Reid, and R. Saleh (eds) *Refiguring the Archive*. Springer: Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0570-8_7, pp. 83–102.

Stoler, A.L. (2008) Epistemic politics: Ontologies of colonial common sense. *The Philosophical Forum* 39(3): 349–361. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9191.2008.00303.x, accessed 1 March 2021.

Taylor, G. (2002) *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood*. New York: Routledge.