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Neologising misogyny: Urban Dictionary's folksonomies of sexual abuse

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Abstract

Web 2.0 has facilitated a particularly toxic brand of digital men's rights activism, collectively known as the Manosphere. This amorphous network of online publics is noted for its virulent anti-feminism, extreme misogyny and synergies with the alt-right. Early manifestations of this phenomenon were confined largely to 4/Chan, Reddit and numerous alt-right forums. More recently, however, this rhetoric has become increasingly evident in Urban Dictionary. This article presents the findings of a machine-learning and manual analysis of Urban Dictionary's entries relating to sex and gender, to assess the extent to which the Manosphere's discourses of extreme misogyny and anti-feminism are working their way into everyday vernacular contexts. It also considers the sociolinguistic and gender-political implications of algorithmic and linguistic capitalism, concluding that Urban Dictionary is less a dictionary than it is a platform of folksonomies, which may exert a disproportionate and toxic influence on online discourses related to gender and sexuality.

Keywords

Anti-feminism, extreme misogyny, folksonomy, lexicography, machine learning, Manosphere, misogyny, scatology, scat porn, sexual abuse, sexual violence, slang, Urban Dictionary

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Introduction

Urbandictionary.com is a crowd-sourced online ‘dictionary’ of contemporary slang, whose content is supplied entirely by users. It was founded in 1999 by American college student Aaron Peckham, and was originally intended as a parody of – and alternative to – dictionary.com. It is the 22nd most popular site in the United States, and Google Analytics data suggest that 45% of the site’s users are 18–24.¹ In 2014, there were more than seven million definitions listed on the site, and it is estimated that 2000 definitions are added daily.² At the time of writing, web analytics company Quantcast ranked it as the 22nd most visited site in the United States, garnering approximately 34 million visitors per month.³ Urban Dictionary has been consulted when building a text normalisation system for Twitter and has been used to create training data for a Twitter-specific sentiment lexicon (Nguyen et al., 2017). It has also been consulted in several high-profile court cases in the United States (Kaufman, 2013). Taken together, these data indicate that Urban Dictionary plays a significant role in shaping many people’s understanding of the world and that, *ipso facto*, how words are defined there is of considerable political importance.

All entries follow a similar format. The user uploads a new word (the headword), followed by its definition, usually one or more usage examples and any hashtags deemed relevant to the entry. This is followed by the name of the poster (typically a pseudonym), the date of the entry and the number of upvotes (‘thumbs up’) and downvotes (‘thumbs down’) that the entry has received. There may be multiple entries for a headword, in which case definitions of this word are ranked, ostensibly according to popularity (see Figure 1). Since Evan Miller criticised the site’s system of scoring entries by subtracting negative ratings from positive ratings in 2009,⁴ it appears that a different algorithm is now used, possibly based on click-through rate. At the time of writing, for example, the top definition of ‘feminism’ has 8642 thumbs up and 1514 thumbs down, while the second-ranked definition has 28,438 thumbs up and 5071 thumbs down. The algorithm used to determine the constantly changing box of Trending headwords that feature on the site’s front page also appears to be based on click-through rate, since these words often have very low numbers of thumbs up and thumbs down.

Unlike other online dictionaries such as Wiktionary or Merriam-Webster, which undergo much deeper levels of curation (Nguyen et al., 2017), Urban Dictionary does not have inclusion criteria based on usage frequency and does not trawl vast quantities of Internet content for context in order to generate the most popular examples of usage. Merriam-Webster editors, for example, look at news stories, books and menus in search of new words and constantly run lists of how words are used and how often they are used. According to Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster’s editor at large, ‘Finding citations is the first step. Each word has to have a body of evidence that shows it’s increasing in use, and it has to have a clear meaning. That sometimes can take a number of years’ (Tenore, 2012).

By contrast, Urban Dictionary is moderated by volunteer editors, who are effectively any users who click the edit button and vote to ‘Add It!’, ‘Keep Out!’ or ‘I Can’t Decide’. There are 10 guidelines for editing,⁵ the first of which specifies that a user may ‘Publish celebrity names but reject friends’ names. Publish definitions of Jennifer Lopez because she’s famous, but reject *my girlfriend Sally*’. Another guideline specifies that editors can

TOP DEFINITION

gender

Similar [the world trade center](#). There used to be 2 of them, but now it's too [sensitive](#) of a subject to [discuss](#)

There are [2 genders](#), male and female, everyone who [says](#) they are some other Gender should be [purged](#)

by [Magnificent Bastard](#) 301 February 09, 2017

2494 698

Get a **Gender** mug for your girlfriend Riley.

Word

A reflection of one's self-image as relating to sexual nature. There are, in general, [three genders](#):

- 1) Male
- 2) Female
- 3) Something you made up one day to feel [speshul](#). E.g. "semiqueer-bi-spirit-shemale". May use made-up pronouns such as "xe", "ze", "schlee", "nflgsufgshihousu", etc. Anyone who finds this ridiculous is a bigot and is [literally Hitler](#).

Can you believe that Facebook doesn't [feature](#) "transquasi-neutermale" in its gender [selection](#)? This is making me sick. This is making it [harder](#) for me to achieve self-realization and be myself!

[#genderqueer](#) [#sex](#) [#male](#) [#female](#) [#social justice](#)

by [Stavroz](#) April 06, 2014

4270 1884

Figure 1. The top two (of 74) entries for the word gender on 11 January 2019.

‘Publish racial and sexual slurs but reject racist and sexist entries. Entries can document discrimination but not endorse it’, while according to guideline 7, editors should ‘Reject sexual violence. Reject made-up violent sexual acts’. Despite this, even the most cursory engagement with Urban Dictionary suggests that there are large numbers of entries which go well beyond merely documenting racist and sexually violent terms to proactively endorsing these perspectives. Yet, according to Peckham, the volunteer editors ‘do an excellent job of filtering out personal attacks and mundane entries’ (Heaton, 2010). He has defended the dictionary against charges of racism and sexism by arguing that, ‘Denying a word exists by removing it from the dictionary is not helping anybody’ (Davis, 2011). However, the distinction between providing an objective definition of a misogynistic or racist word and providing a definition of that word which is sympathetic to a misogynistic or racist worldview often appears to be unclear. Peckham urges ‘those who can’t take the linguistic heat’ to ‘step off and chillax’, maintaining that ‘everyone deserves the opportunity to understand and be understood’ (Peckham, 2009: vii).

The question of *how* Urban Dictionary might be shaping understanding is key to this study. Given its popularity among users aged 18–24 years, its political and ideological impact is most likely significant. In many instances, internet users do not even need to visit the site, as simply Googling a sexual slang word such as ‘spit roast’ or a gender-related word such as ‘feminism’ will usually return the Urban Dictionary definition in the top 1–5 definitions. If we consider this alongside Urban Dictionary’s lack of inclusion criteria and the high level of opinion-focused entries found by Nguyen et al. (2017), the extent and nature of its misogynistic and Manosphere-inflected content is potentially a cause for concern and requires further investigation.

Literature review

Online misogyny, like other forms of digital hate such as racism and homophobia, has become an issue of growing concern. A number of large-scale studies have shown that women are much more likely than men to experience severe types of gender-based or sexual harassment and that women are much more likely than men to experience adverse

psychological effects as a result of this abuse.⁶ In addition to direct abuse, digital hate may take the form of indirect speech acts or what Siapera et al. (2018), in the context of online racism, refer to as ‘racially loaded toxic comments’. Such content generates ‘affective intensity’ (Paasonen, 2015), thus increasing site traffic, and is frequently amplified by the algorithmic politics of certain platforms (Massanari, 2017). According to Siapera et al. (2018), the effect of this toxic content is to dehumanise those targeted and to justify and normalise exclusion and even violence in offline contexts. Similarly, in the context of gender hate, misogynistic content works to normalise sexist and sexualised attitudes towards women, as well as exerting powerful effects of chilling, silencing and self-censorship (Ging and Siapera, 2018).

While misogynistic trolling and abuse occur across a wide range of mainstream online platforms, from Twitter to Facebook memorial pages, the rhetorical base of the new and deeply misogynistic anti-feminist politics, collectively known as the Manosphere, is typically located in the geekier and more extreme spaces of the Internet, such as 4/Chan (Manivannan, 2013; Nagle, 2015), Reddit (Massanari, 2017) and numerous men’s rights activist (MRA) and Red Pill sites such as Return of Kings (Mountford, 2018). In recent years, a growing number of scholars have been attending to the motivations, dynamics and impacts of this phenomenon from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Taken together, this work describes a complex and often contradictory set of online assemblages, characterised by both neo-conservative and techno-libertarian sensibilities (Nagle, 2015), toxic masculinity (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016), a highly personalised politics of anti-feminism (Ging, 2017), a significant overlap with alt-right sensibilities (Marwick and Lewis, 2017), and a discursive register that revels in irony, snarkiness and the affective immediacy of meme culture (Massanari and Chess, 2018). Because the Manosphere is also centrally preoccupied with male sexual strategy (O’Neill, 2015), entitlement and disenfranchisement, issuing women with rape and death threats is a standard discursive tactic, a phenomenon described by Jane (2017) as ‘Rapeglish’.

Recently, however, key discourses associated with the Manosphere – extreme misogyny and anti-feminism, hatred of gender studies and ‘Cultural Marxism’, evolutionary psychology and the weaponization of hardcore pornography (Ging, 2017) – have become increasingly evident in Urban Dictionary, particularly in definitions of headwords relating to sex, gender and racial politics. Despite this, only a couple of journalistic interventions (Chang, 2017; Lawson, 2017) have addressed this phenomenon. Perhaps even more surprisingly, only a small amount of academic scholarship has emerged on Urban Dictionary, and none of this engages with the issue of misogyny. Cotter and Damaso (2007) position their analysis within the history of modern English lexicography, conceptualising Urban Dictionary as an expansion of traditional processes of collaboration, and describing it as an ‘emergent archive of contemporary usage and collaborative codification’. The authors contend that ‘Urban Dictionary captures what most traditional English dictionaries fall short of: recording ephemeral quotidian spoken language, and representing popular and divergent, as opposed to authorized and uniform, views of meaning’ (Cotter and Damaso, 2007: 1–2). Similarly, Smith (2011) views Urban Dictionary as a challenge to traditional lexicography as well as to prescriptivist views of language, arguing that non-standard language formation enables youth to contest their diminished communication capital.

Both of these analyses are underpinned by the assumption that an organic lexicographic process occurs from the circulation of neologisms in society to their entry in Urban Dictionary, despite the fact that vast numbers of its neologisms are clearly not in widespread use. According to slang expert Jonathon Green, ‘There aren’t 2000 new slang words a day – they don’t exist. It undermines the whole point of a dictionary’ (Davis, 2011). Such framings thus fail to acknowledge the various ways in which Urban Dictionary’s lack of inclusion criteria and weak moderation leave it open to political and ideological manipulation. Existing literature on Urban Dictionary also tends to assume that the platform is concerned exclusively with neologisms. For Cotter and Damaso (2007), Urban Dictionary is strongly characterised by word-formation processes such as compounding, derivation, conversion and shortening. However, the implication that the recording of neologisms is its primary *raison d’être* requires further investigation, given that even a preliminary engagement with Urban Dictionary reveals that it contains many existing words, such as ‘gender’, ‘feminism’ or ‘woman’, whose standard meanings are often redefined, discredited or mocked.

In the field of computational linguistics, Nguyen et al. (2017) found a high presence of opinion-focused entries, as opposed to the meaning-focused entries normally found in traditional dictionaries. The authors also found a high presence of offensive content but assert that highly offensive content tends to receive lower scores through the voting system. While this may be true of the aggregate data, it is noteworthy that, at the time of their data collection, the top 10 headwords with the most definitions included ‘chode’, ‘Canada’s history’, ‘sex’ and ‘cunt’. Nguyen et al.’s (2017) study is a valuable contribution in terms of tracing big data trends that distinguish Urban Dictionary from traditional dictionaries, for example, its higher levels of heterogeneity. However, the authors still see in this heterogeneity ‘opportunities to analyse and track language innovation’, again revealing a belief in Urban Dictionary as a site of linguistic innovation reflective of social reality. Closer, qualitative analysis would have revealed, however, that the term ‘Canada’s history’ has no usage outside of Urban Dictionary, where it has a uniquely pornographic and misogynistic range of meanings. The literature is, therefore, remarkably gender-blind, appearing unconcerned with the gender of users, the gendered nature of definitions or how both of these might be prioritising and amplifying a particular set of ideological positions around gender. Thus, while Nguyen et al. (2017) correctly assert that ‘The emergence of Web 2.0 platforms. . .has drastically changed the information market’, they do not elaborate on the qualitative nature of these changes or on their social, linguistic and political implications. By quantifying and qualitatively analysing misogynistic content on Urban Dictionary, we test the assumption that linguistic innovation necessarily improves communications and strengthens the language (Cotter and Damaso, 2007: 2), or that it is always driven by a benign concept of intellectual progress or organic human creativity.

Concern about the extent and nature of misogynistic content on Urban Dictionary goes beyond its potential impact on young people’s perceptions of gender equality or sexual relationships. Broader concerns arise, for example, about the interference of ‘algorithmic capitalism’ (Peters, 2017) in lexicographic processes. As Pip Thornton (2017, 2018) points out, in the realm of linguistic capitalism, certain words are worth more than others. For example, in the spring of 2016, Morgan (2017) observed that

human-operated fake or sock puppet⁷ accounts were six times more likely than other users in the same community to compare Hillary Clinton to Adolf Hitler by referring to her as 'Hitlery' and twice as likely to describe Clinton as a 'criminal'. Interestingly, Morgan's data shows that these shifts in language were primarily initiated by fewer than 400 human-operated sock puppet accounts on Twitter and Facebook and 800 commenters on Breitbart news articles. In other words, certain terms can become amplified, not because they are in widespread daily usage but because they have political, economic or controversial value, with the result that they become artificially embedded in mainstream lexicons. Thornton (2017) cites an example whereby the Oxford online dictionary, having conducted an extensive trawl of Internet content in order to generate a usage example for the word 'feminist', came up with the pairing 'rabid feminist', a term which was in circulation due to the amplification of anti-feminist and men's rights discourse online. In effect, therefore, this is a reversal of the standard lexicographic process, whereby lexicalisation influences usage rather than usage determining lexicalisation.

This is not to underestimate the extent of misogyny in society generally, or the fact that patriarchal ideology has always influenced word formation and lexicalisation. As Lindsay Rose Russell (2018) points out, lexical reference sources have long been biased against women. By way of example, she cites the overlexicalisation of female promiscuity, whereby many words have been created to describe a single concept, such as 'slut', 'whore', 'prostitute', 'slag' and 'skank'. However, this process is vastly accelerated by the technological affordances of new media, which rapidly amplify certain words and concepts through processes of herding, brigading, power law effects and echo chambers (Massanari, 2017). Features such as hashtags, for example, serve as semantic annotations that allow users to 'self-curate' specific thematic content on social media platforms (Meraz, 2017). In the case of Urban Dictionary, it is possible that a relatively small number of network actors are exerting a disproportionate influence on online discourse related to gender and sexuality. This becomes all the more significant if we consider that Googling the term 'feminism' currently returns Urban Dictionary as the fourth result, after Google dictionary, a Forbes article and Wikipedia. At the time of writing, there are 306 definitions listed for feminism, and the top 20 are vehemently anti-feminist, exhibiting strong discursive characteristics of the contemporary men's rights movement, and high levels of misogyny and homophobia. Despite this, existing scholarly work on Urban Dictionary has not moved beyond the concept of offensiveness to consider what political or ideological forces and discourses might be at work. It does not consider the manipulative tendencies of the 'algorithmic turn' nor does it address the apparently gendered mode of address employed by Urban Dictionary's editors.

Methodology

In order to investigate both the extent and nature of misogynistic content on Urban Dictionary, we conducted two analyses. First, we conducted machine-learning analysis of the entire Urban Dictionary data set from 1999–2016, including all definitions posted in that period. Second, we conducted a smaller-scale manual content analysis of a data set comprised of a random monthly snapshot of the 30 top trending words from September 2017 to April 2018.

In relation to the entire Urban Dictionary data set from 1999 to 2016, we first filtered potentially misogynistic definitions based on a glossary of terms typically associated with misogyny and anti-feminism. However, a manual inspection revealed that the results were not sufficiently accurate, since some of these words could be used in both a misogynistic and non-misogynistic way. To overcome this, we built a machine-learning classifier to distinguish between true and false misogynistic definitions. Two independent coders manually tagged 5000 definitions, which we then used to train the algorithm; we tested different methodologies and different settings in order to find a solution with a limited number of false positives/negatives. These included logistic regression, random forest and naïve Bayes classifiers. We were particularly concerned with false positives, that is, definitions classified as misogynistic when they were not. The random forest was the algorithm with the best performance, since it has a low number of false negatives and a very low number of false positives; in other words, it provides a conservative classification, which prevented us from overestimating the presence of misogyny in our study.

The smaller-scale manual content analysis involved taking a snapshot of the top 30 trending words once a month from September 2017 to April 2018. We used an online random number generator to determine the date on which the snapshot was taken each month. The purpose of this part of the study was twofold: first, to determine whether the extent of misogyny was similar across a smaller data set of top trending words, whose popularity is presumably determined by click-through rate, and second, to take a closer, more qualitative look at the nature of the definitions provided for these headwords. In addition to quantifying misogyny, this also enabled us to identify definitions which employed a male mode of address, that is, which assumed a male subjectivity without justification or assumed a male audience. For every headword captured, we coded for total number of definitions, number of misogynistic definitions, number of definitions employing a male mode of address and number of thumbs up and thumbs down for the top definition. From this corpus, we made a smaller data set of headwords that related specifically to sex or gender, and subjected these definitions to qualitative analysis, identifying recurring tropes and discourses.

Findings

Running the algorithm through the full list of potentially misogynistic definitions left us with 248,543 definitions featuring true misogynistic content ('misogynistic definitions'), which constitutes 9.53% of the entire Urban Dictionary data set (see Table 1). Definitions coded as misogynistic received 8.3% of all thumbs up across the entire dictionary and 8.8% of all thumbs down.

Interestingly, of the headwords classified as misogynistic, the most popular (measured by thumbs up) tended to be established words such as sex, pussy, blow job, feminist and slut, rather than neologisms. There was a high degree of correlation between these words and those which attracted the most thumbs down, which were also mainly established words such as sex, pussy, blow job, horny and cunt. Similarly, bigrams and trigrams (the most frequently co-occurring words in the misogyny data set) revealed no neologisms at all and were dominated by word pairings such as anal sex, oral sex, sexual intercourse, male female, sexual act, woman vagina, man woman, sex act and doggy style.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Total Urban Dictionary sample	Misogynistic subsample
Total number of words	2,606,519	248,543
Total number of unique words	1,733,113	230,589
Total number of definitions	2,606,359	248,543
Total number of unique definitions	2,638,754	238,356
Total number of users	2,606,484	223,847
Total number of thumbs up	170,289,029	14,183,380
Total number of thumbs down	110,319,181	9,780,605

Overall, the number of thumbs up for ‘popular’ definitions (those which attracted the most thumbs up or thumbs down) was significantly higher than the number of thumbs down. Of those definitions which made it into both the top 15 thumbs up and the top 15 thumbs down lists, the number of thumbs up by far exceeded the number of thumbs down (see Table 2). For example, a definition for the term Dirty Sanchez ranked 7th in the top thumbs up and 9th in the top thumbs down lists (39,087 thumbs up, 17,562 thumbs down). This definition describes a heterosexual, scatological sex act, resulting in the woman receiving a ‘moustache’ on her upper lip. Similarly, the most popular definition for the term Donkey Punch ranked 9th in the top thumbs up list and 5th in the top thumbs down list, receiving almost twice as many thumbs up (39,087) as thumbs down (24,133). This definition describes a violent heterosexual sex act, which involves punching ‘the poor little lady in the back of the head’ with a view to increasing male sexual pleasure. It also employs an explicitly male mode of address, whereby both the editor and the audience are assumed to be male:

The donkey punch is when your engaged in anal sex making the orgasm all that more better (for you of course)

The most popular definition for pussy (‘The box a dick comes in’) received 73,146 thumbs up and 27,388 thumbs down, while the definition for slut received well over twice as many thumbs up as thumbs down:

Someone who provides a very needed service for the community and sleeps with everyone, even the guy that has no shot at getting laid and everyone knows it. She will give him a sympathy fuck either because someone asked her to or she just has to fuck everyone she knows. These are great people, and without them sex crimes would definitely increase. Thank you slut, where ever you are

(36,010 thumbs up and 14,997 thumbs down)

In addition to demonstrating that much of Urban Dictionary’s popular content consists of extant words rather than neologisms, these definitions also indicate that the

Table 2. Top 15 thumbs downs and thumbs up definitions.

Words whose misogynistic definitions received the most thumbs up	Thumbs up	Words whose misogynistic definitions received the most thumbs down	Thumbs down
Sex	100,007	Sex	64,827
Pussy	73,146	Sex	44,372
Sex	69,475	Pussy	27,388
Blow job	56,248	Blow job	24,977
Feminist	42,950	Donkey punch	24,133
Feminist	40,435	Horny	21,957
Dirty Sanchez	39,087	Cunt	21,227
Slut	36,010	Truffle butter	19,295
Donkey punch	34,577	Dirty Sanchez	17,562
Feminism	34,040	Pussy	17,308
Cunt	32,529	Slut	14,997
Pussy	32,500	Douche	14,468
Truffle butter	32,427	Blow job	14,190
Horny	31,237	MRA	12,936
Eat out	27,966	Dirty Sanchez	12,761

MRA: men's rights activist.

majority of their creators are male. This can be inferred not only by an implicit male subjectivity in the description of sexual acts, wherein men are described *doing things to* women, but also in a more explicit male mode of address, where the poster assumes he is speaking to other men. For example,

Truffle butter is when you pull your dick out of . . .

(32,427 thumbs up, 19,295 thumbs down)

Finally, in the definition of 'slut' above, not only is it assumed that a slut is necessarily female but the definition itself celebrates female sexual subservience, positing certain women's promiscuity as a means of reducing rape.

We also generated some data on user analytics, namely a list of the top 25 active users, measured according to the number of misogynistic definitions they have generated, and a list of the top 25 high-engagement users, measured according to the numbers of thumbs up and thumbs down they have given to extant misogynistic definitions. The first observation is that the vast majority of real names used are male (Jake, Mike, Matt, Dave, Alex, Joe, Nick, John, Bob, Steve, Chris, etc.). Many of the pseudonyms used also suggest male users, for example, Cheerleader Fucker, Very Horny Man and makehersquirt, while others are not possible to infer (grrlgerms, Nympho, Soiled Undergarment, wolf-bait51). Significantly, the list of the top 25 active users, measured according to the number of definitions they have generated, contains a much higher percentage of evidently

male users (68% evidently male, 28% impossible to tell, 4% evidently female) than the list of the top 25 high-engagement users (32% evidently male, 48% impossible to tell, 16% evidently female). This indicates that content generation in Urban Dictionary is strongly male-dominated, while more passive engagement such as liking or disliking may be somewhat less so. This data also shows that some users are extremely active: for example, 1140 misogynistic definitions have been generated by Anonymous (although it is likely that more than one user has this name), Dick Uppinsider has generated 299 and Deep Blue 2012 has generated 166, suggesting that a relatively small number of actors can exert a considerable influence on meaning-making. After this, the definition count decreases gradually from 101 to 41, although this still indicates a relatively consistent output over the period under examination.

Manual content analysis

The front or main page of the Urban Dictionary site always features a list of 30 ‘trending rn’ (right now) words. Presumably based on click-through rate, these headwords are deliberately positioned to attract users’ attention and curiosity. Because of their prominence, we decided to conduct a systematic manual analysis of a representative sample of these trending words and their definitions over a period of 8 months.

This involved taking a snapshot of the 30 top trending words (as per Figure 2) once per month over a period of 8 months, from September 2017 to April 2018. We used a random number generator (1–30) to determine the date on which the top trending words would be captured each month. For each headword captured, we counted the number of definitions, and of every unique definition we asked (1) whether it was misogynistic in nature and (2) whether it employed an explicitly male mode of address. Our definition of ‘misogynistic’ means explicitly endorsing – rather than simply describing – a misogynistic act, point of view or opinion. Misogyny is defined here as referring to women pejoratively (e.g. bitch, ho, cunt, skank, slut, whore, etc.), hitting or killing women, non-consensual sexual acts, sexual deception of women, sexual acts involving violence, humiliation or degradation of women, describing women as intellectually inferior, disgust for female genitalia and ridiculing of/disgust for femininity. Male mode of address was defined as explicitly endorsing a male or masculinist point of view, explicitly interpellating other males or employing usage examples that take male subjectivity for granted. Definitions which merely suggested a male user (e.g. where the username was apparently male or the tone, register or topic implied a masculine point of view), were not coded positively in this regard. In other words, we counted only definitions which overtly and explicitly assumed male subjectivity as the norm (as per Figure 3).

This ‘belt-and-braces’ approach of combining big data analysis with a smaller scale manual content analysis allowed us to investigate at a more granular level whether the 9.53% of misogynistic content identified by our trained algorithm for the entire Urban Dictionary data set (1999–2016) was consistent with the level of misogyny present in a representative sample of trending words gathered over an 8-month period. The findings show that the level of misogyny in the trending words data set (averaging at 14.2%), although subject to considerable fluctuation, was considerably higher than the 9.53% of misogynistic content detected by machine learning in the entire Urban Dictionary data

TRENDING RN - SEPTEMBER 23, 2018		
1. Squashed	11. Death roll	21. Cawfee
2. Rule 38	12. Uh Vai Morrer	22. super adventure club
3. Stoma Sex	13. Hanzo-main	23. rope gang
4. colostomy bag	14. Clitty-litter	24. seks
5. sorority squat	15. helf	25. greesy
6. baker's dozen	16. Agekin	26. love shy
7. Blue Lips	17. sleep with the fishes	27. interested
8. naked otter	18. Polish Bike Ride	28. Texas Chilll Bowl
9. Trach shake	19. september 21	29. doorknob
10. Pound cake	20. dislike	30. Nittany Lion

Figure 2. Example of the trending rn list which is constantly featured on Urban Dictionary's front page.





Cincinnati Switcheroo

Before doing a chick, you fish one of your [roommate's](#) used condoms from [the trash](#), turn it inside-out, and [put it on](#). When the chick gets pregnant, you say, "It ain't mine!"

Janice thought I got her pregnant during our [one night stand](#), but it's probably my [roommate's](#) because I gave her the ol' Cincinnati Switcheroo.

[#sincity](#) [#cincy](#) [#switchero](#) [#condom](#) [#pregnancy](#) [#pregnant](#) [#used semen](#) [#do-it-yourself spermbank](#) [#maury povich](#) [#you are not the father](#)

by [Coby Taylor](#) November 26, 2007

 956
 181



Get a **Cincinnati Switcheroo** mug for your daughter-in-law Jovana.



Figure 3. Example of a definition from the data set which was coded as misogynistic and employing an explicitly male mode of address.

set (see Table 3). The average percentage of definitions that employed an explicitly male mode of address was also significantly high at 21.1%.

These findings may indicate that manual analysis is more accurate at detecting misogyny than the trained algorithm. For example, incidences of subtle or ironic misogyny are generally not picked up by the algorithm, particularly in the absence of misogynistic hashtags (see Figure 4). They could also indicate that Urban Dictionary became significantly more misogynistic after 2016, in the wake of President Trump's election in the United States, which provoked a notable increase in misogynistic, homophobic and racist discourse online (Morgan, 2017). It is also likely that new and controversial words are captured in the trending rn box because they have the highest click-through rate.

Table 3. Breakdown of misogyny and male mode of address in definitions contained in the sample of trending words.

Date of snapshot	Total no. of definitions	No. of definitions containing misogyny	Percentage of definitions containing misogyny	No. of definitions employing a male mode of address	Percentage of definitions employing a male mode of address
19 September 2017	563	43	7.6	64	11.4
19 October 2017	284	56	19.7	56	19.7
20 November 2017	364	35	9.6	93	25.5
11 December 2017	140	12	8.6	26	18.6
9 January 2018	166	32	19.3	49	29.5
28 February 2018	256	59	23	95	37.1
16 March 2018	878	91	10.4	130	14.8
17 April 2018	248	37	14.9	31	12.5

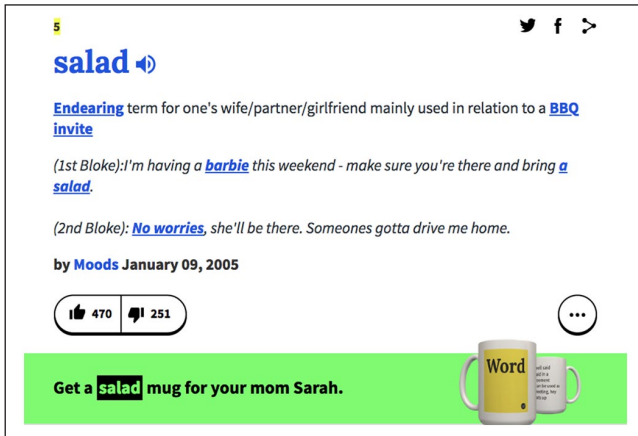


Figure 4. An example of subtle or ironic misogyny, which was picked up in the manual coding but would not have been detected by the algorithm.

Highlighting them on the front page directs additional traffic to them, increasing their ‘affective intensity’ (Paasonen, 2015). Thus, even though many of these definitions receive very few thumbs up or thumbs down, they function to emphasise Urban Dictionary as a site dominated by controversial terms and neologisms.

From the trending words data set, we generated a smaller data set of specifically sex- or gender-related headwords.⁸ These headwords constituted 28.6% of the entire trending words data set. Of the 776 definitions pertaining to these headwords, 30.4% were misogynistic and 38.1% employed an explicitly male mode of address. These percentages are significantly higher than the average percentages of misogyny (14.2%) and male mode of address (21.1%) identified in the general ‘trending words’ data set. It is also

noteworthy that the top definitions for these headwords attract a significantly higher average number of thumbs up (673.9) than those in the trending words data set overall (487.6). From these percentages, we can broadly infer that there is a high probability that someone searching Urban Dictionary for a sex- or gender-related word will encounter misogynistic definitions.

Conducting a manual content analysis of this data set also allowed for qualitative engagement with Urban Dictionary's misogynistic and masculinist definitions, revealing a number of recurrent or dominant themes and discourses. Gender-political terms captured in the data set were heavily dominated by the anti-feminist rhetoric of the Manosphere. For example, many of the definitions for the term 'mansplain' posited feminists as feminazis, anti-vaxxers, childish or irrational, and mobilised rhetorics of reverse sexism, male victimhood and evolutionary psychology. With regard to misogynistic content, the most dominant theme was that of sexual violence, featuring a range of transgressive sex acts and discourses deriving directly from misogynistic porn. The most notable among these was defecating on and in women during sex, sometimes tagged as #coprophagia or #scatporn. The other recurrent themes were ejaculating in women's faces, eyes and other orifices, punching them during sex and forcing them to perform various sex acts. Misogynistic definitions also featured multiple terms of disgust for women, either relating to their looks (fat and ugly being the most frequent), their intelligence (dumb bitch) or their 'promiscuity' (slut, skank, whore). This theme of disgust frequently focused on women's body parts, a particularly salient theme being that of engorged, deformed or putrid female genitalia, usually associated with an excess of sexual activity or bodily fluids (e.g. truffle butter, wizard sleeve, DV, grilled cheese sandwich). Unshaven female genitalia were also a source of disgust, a theme which emerged regularly in definitions of the headword 'bearded clam' (55.2% of whose definitions were misogynistic and 75.9% of which employed an explicitly male mode of address). Sometimes, the notion that violent sexual acts are consensual was signalled by facetiously including terms such as 'willing', while more frequently the violence was gratuitous and unapologetic.

Typical examples of sexually abusive language captured in the data set included definitions for the terms cup of tea, Biscuits and Gravy, Mushroom Welt and Grilled Cheese sandwich. These definitions involved forcing large objects into women's bodies, such as bowling pins, novelty bats, crowbars and funnels, resulting in serious bodily harm ('severely impacting the colon', 'until she split in two', 'I had to leave her with a vicious mushroom welt'). They also involved tying women up, removing women's public hair using pliers and inflicting welts on a woman's face using the penis, as well as vomiting, spitting, ejaculating and urinating on women. Most frequently, the references to women in the usage examples provided were nameless and dehumanised such as 'a girl', 'a bird', 'a bitch', 'that bitch' or 'some piece of ass'. Alternatively, they were described by name (Carmen, Jayne, etc.) or as 'your mom'/'X's mom' or 'my girlfriend'/'my girlfriend X'. Celebrity names were rarely used, although 'stevie nicks' is cited in one of the definitions for wizard sleeve. Urban Dictionary's content generators thus blatantly flout the editing guideline 'Publish celebrity names but reject friends' names. Publish definitions of Jennifer Lopez because she's famous, but reject *my girlfriend Sally*, a transgression which clearly goes unchecked and unedited.

The proportion of misogynistic definitions identified in Urban Dictionary – evidenced by both our big data analysis and our smaller content analysis of a representative sample of trending words – is substantial. In particular, definitions for headwords relating specifically to sex and gender reveal high levels of misogyny (approximately, one-third), indicating that Urban Dictionary’s editors regularly ignore guideline 7, which states that editors should ‘Reject sexual violence. Reject made-up violent sexual acts’. This is a particular cause for concern if we consider that Google searches for many of these words (e.g. wizard sleeve, bearded clam, fub) turn up the Urban Dictionary definition in first or second place. Although, in the big data analysis, we did not teach the algorithm to search for instances of misandry, we looked for these in the manual content analysis but found none. Similarly, we found no definitions which involved descriptions of women committing violent or degrading sexual acts on men. It is important to consider that the reach of Urban Dictionary’s sexual lexicon is not restricted to its predominantly male editors. According to Google Analytics, 47% of the site’s visitors are female. In the light of research which shows that exposure to violent pornography elicits reactions of fear and low self-esteem in women (Shaw, 1999), it is possible that many girls and young women are internalising harmful image-eries by acquainting themselves with sexual slang through the lens of Urban Dictionary’s violent, misogynistic and scatological definitions.

Meanwhile, the percentage of definitions employing an explicitly male mode of address (21.1%) calls into question any claims made in support of Urban Dictionary as an objective, democratic or inclusive space. As online user names are an unreliable indicator of gender, our coding was necessarily conservative, relying on the internal syntax of definitions and usage examples. Given this, and considering the high prevalence of apparently male user names, it is likely that a much higher proportion of definitions of Urban Dictionary are male-generated. In the specific realm of sex- or gender-related words, 38.1% of definitions employed an explicitly male mode of address and, although we did not code for them, it is important to note that in the qualitative content analysis, we observed that definitions with an explicitly female mode of address were effectively non-existent. It is also worth pointing out that these findings do not include definitions that were coded as racist or homophobic, both of which are also apparently abundant in Urban Dictionary, and invite further investigation in the future. Although this analysis was concerned exclusively with misogyny, many definitions that we coded as misogynistic were also racist or homophobic (see Figure 5).

Our findings, when considered in conjunction with Urban Dictionary’s lack of inclusion criteria and lack of moderation, lead us to suggest that Urban Dictionary is less an online dictionary than it is a searchable platform, which enables the intermediation of user-generated content (DeNardis and Hackl, 2015). Through the use of hyperlinks and hashtags, its users create folksonomies, or classification systems derived from user-generated electronic tags or keywords that annotate and describe online content. Here we borrow Thompson and Wood’s (2018) concept of ‘folksonomies of misogyny’, a term they used to describe practices of social tagging and networked misogyny on creepshot websites. According to the Gartner IT Glossary definition, ‘a folksonomy evolves when many users create or store content at particular sites and identify what they think the content is about. This type of grass-roots community classification . . . is subject to



Figure 5. Typical example of a definition including racist and misogynistic speech terms.

vandalism and manipulation'. Urban Dictionary's editors shape meaning not only by generating and tagging neologisms but also by redefining and classifying existing terms into folksonomies of misogynistic and anti-feminist rhetoric. Both the scale and the formulaic nature of these discourses point to a collective and concerted set of discursive attacks on women, derived largely from the gender-political logics of the Manosphere and violent, straight male pornography. This weaponization of sex is distinct from the 'grotesquerie' described by Attwood (2005) in relation to British Lad Culture of the 1990s and 2000s, explained by Gauntlett (2002) as a 'kind of defensive shield' against social change. Though not unrelated, the current rhetoric derives from a much more antagonistic politics of sexual entitlement, disenfranchisement and revenge, which has evolved largely through the social media ecosystem.

Urban Dictionary thus functions as a significant conduit between different 'semiospheres' (Lotman, 2000 [1990]); in this case, from the 'rebellious fringes' of 4/Chan, 'scat porn' and extreme anti-feminist forums to the mainstream 'centre' that is Urban Dictionary, 'where they might stand a chance of imposing their norms, agendas, and aesthetics on the broader semiosphere (p. 134)'. As far as sex and gender are concerned, it would appear that words and concepts that were 'digitally born' (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016) in the Manosphere exert a far greater influence on Urban Dictionary than does everyday language usage. On the contrary, many words arguably make their way into everyday usage by virtue of appearing in Urban Dictionary, thus reversing the normal process of lexicographical innovation. This process of semiospheric transfer does not just concern the introduction of new words; it also relates to the recirculation and redefinition of existing words. As our big data analysis showed, the definitions that attract the most (thumbs up and thumbs down) traffic in the Urban Dictionary database as a whole are predominantly existing words which are redefined, discredited or mocked to suit specific ideological (anti-feminist, misogynist) agendas. For example, most or many of the definitions for words such as gender, woman, feminism, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) and vagina are heavily inflected with misogynist, anti-feminist or homophobic sentiment.

Conclusion

Thornton (2017) contends that, 'By virtue of their reproducibility and enhanced means of dissemination, digitised words can have paratextual – and often political – agencies and excesses beyond their linguistic function'. Despite this, existing scholarship on Urban Dictionary fails to acknowledge the possibility of its technological affordances being exploited for the purpose of concerted and systematic political subversion of language by anti-feminist MRAs, homophobic groups and the alt-right. As Morgan's (2017) research demonstrates, the semantic shapeshifting that infiltrated Twitter, Facebook and the comments section of Breitbart during the run up to the 2016 US election was not reflective of new forms of language use but rather a conscious and concerted attempt to assert a new linguistic hegemony. Thus, a word such as 'Jewish', which in mainstream contexts is used to describe religion, is used in alt-right tweets as synonymous with 'satanic' or 'homosexual' because in that community it is an epithet. Our findings suggest that similar processes of discursive transfiguration are at work on Urban Dictionary in connection with words and definitions related to sex and gender, such as woman, feminism, LGBT, vagina and rape. For example, we have noted that, since the research began, the small minority of more objective definitions of the headword 'feminism' have disappeared, to give way to an almost exclusively anti-feminist repertoire of entries. This suggests that processes of herding and brigading are at work, with a recurrent set of themes around sex and feminism becoming persistent, amplified and normalised in this space, although future longitudinal studies would be required to test this particular hypothesis.

To conclude, our findings challenge common-sense understandings of Urban Dictionary as a site of democratic and consensus-based linguistic innovation. They also call into question Cotter and Damaso's (2007) claim that Urban Dictionary provides 'a context for collaborative engagement and meaning-making'. On the contrary, the technological affordances of this platform, namely its structure as a network of folksonomies as opposed to a curated collaborative dictionary, have enabled the Manosphere's toxic misogyny to percolate into mainstream culture. The distinctly misogynistic and anti-feminist discourse we identified in relation to sex- and gender-related definitions, the formulaic nature of this misogyny and the prevalence of a male mode of address all point to an ideologically cohesive community engaging in the type of networked misogyny described by Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) and Marwick and Caplan (2018). These discourses of anti-feminism and extreme misogynistic pornography, previously located on platforms such as 4/Chan and r/TheRedPill and r/MensRights subreddits, thus position Urban Dictionary as a significant site of semiotic conflict in the online gender wars. According to Drot-Troha (2018), 'Language evolves much like predators do and when hunters fear themselves being hunted, they will use words as tools to harm, adopting and adapting them to maintain the power balance'. Even if these displays of toxicity and 'aggrieved entitlement' (Kimmel, 2015) are performative, aimed at gaining peer approval or the product of immaturity, they are nonetheless of concern. They have significant currency in the digital capitalist marketplace (Thornton, 2018), exerting substantial impact not only on processes of lexicalisation but potentially also on young men's perceptions of women and on women's perceptions of themselves. This becomes all the more relevant in a digital culture where young people frequently turn to the Internet for

information on sex (Pound et al., 2016) and thus where exposure to the discourses of ‘toxic technocultures’ (Massanari, 2017) may constitute their first engagements with concepts of sexuality, gender and sexual consent.

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Notes

1. <https://ads.urbandictionary.com/>
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/04/technology/a-lexicon-of-the-Internet-updated-by-its-users.html>
3. <https://www.quantcast.com/top-sites> accessed on 2019-17-02
4. <http://www.evanmiller.org/how-not-to-sort-by-average-rating.html>
5. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Urban%20Dictionary%20editing>
6. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/>
7. A sock puppet is a user account that is controlled by an individual (or puppet master) who controls at least one other user account (Kumar et al., 2017).
8. This by no means captures all *definitions* relating to sex or gender. If one were looking for instances of homophobia, for example, the headword ‘hipster’ (which has 566 definitions) would not usually be associated with sexuality and yet has an inordinately high number of homophobic definitions.

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