



We are going to see more and more writing about incels as some continue to commit acts of violent misogyny. But how people write about them matters. (Shutterstock)

We need to pay better attention to the ways people talk about incels

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Men's rights activists have been around since the mid-1970s when scholars began to study feminist ideas and politics. But over the past 50 years, this movement has shifted and many of these activists are migrating towards more extreme and misogynistic views — the most violent of which are incels.

Research on incels is growing, and in December of last year, New York University (NYU) released *Incels: Inside the world of involuntary celibates*. While the report includes a useful glossary of incel terms and ideology, worldview and theory, there are issues with it. And these issues are common across incel-related writing (and writing on other violent terrorists), making it an issue that people need to get a handle on.

In the context of communities like incels, researchers must navigate a line between exploration and exposing content for wider consumption.

The dilemma here is that when researchers are working from a perspective critical of these ideologies we should be aware of how our research might serve to amplify the messaging. Are we inadvertently honouring the people we seek to condemn?

It is certainly possible to walk that line, and communications researchers Debbie Ging and Adrienne Massanari provide us with good examples. However, in reports like the one out of NYU, some common practices are problematic.

Risk creating worshippers and copycats

One of the most discussed hot-button issues when writing about far-right and misogynist violence is whether to identify attackers.

Like using the word incel itself, naming well-known attackers adds shock value. But when people do this, regardless of intention, it increases the profile of the attackers and can elevate them to positions of cultural phenomena and martyrdom.

Perhaps the most significant example of this is the Isla Vista killer, who killed six people during a multi-site spree in California, in 2014. The killings were heinous, but at the risk of sounding glib, six deaths in a mass killing isn't huge in the United States. What made this incident huge was the nearly perpetual coverage and re-inscription of the killer across popular media and the academy.

By publishing and re-publishing this information, media and academics helped make the perpetrator an icon, inadvertently supporting and perpetuating the incel community's veneration of individuals who have "died for the cause."

When we label attackers incels, we inflate their power

The NYU report labelled the perpetrator of the 1989 École Polytechnique tragedy the first incel. While it might be true that he had some characteristics that would align him with today's misogynist incels, he was not an incel.

Given that the term incel as it is used today did not appear until the late 1990s, it is simply not possible for him to have been an incel.

To include him in any accounting of incel violence does a disservice to those working to disrupt violence against women, as it flattens the nuances and complexities of misogynistic violence.

The Montréal perpetrator's inclusion in the history of incel violence is a fabrication to give certain ideological positionings deeper roots. His inclusion gives a historical significance and early presence to incelism while helping provide legitimacy.

A bunch of men angrily staring at a woman

Radicalization towards incelism is a process and there are opportunities to stop the movement towards radical ideas.
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The issues are much deeper than incels

In the context of media coverage and academia, incels are trendy; they get views.

For most incels, violent misogynist incelism is the end of their journey, not the beginning. They have likely been introduced to elements of incelism in other spaces (like pick-up artist communities) and moved slowly into incelism.

The appeal of covering incels can blind people of this pathway, and facilitate a move to innocence where people ignore the more mundane and everyday instances of violent misogyny.

The fact that radicalization is a process provides opportunities to stop movement towards radical ideas — there are places where men can be intercepted before they are encouraged (or encourage others) to do real violence.

Even once men become incels, there are opportunities for deradicalization and de-conversion, like the work being done by Groundswell Project in the United Kingdom.

We are going to see more and more writing about incels as some continue to commit acts of violent misogyny. But how people write about them matters.

The danger is that in giving incel ideology all of this time and energy people will unavoidably perpetuate what they seek to stop. It gives energy to a movement that's primary interest is subjugating women and increases the value of violence.

As writers and academics, we have the responsibility to do better. There is no place for this violence in Canada, and we bear part of the responsibility to stop it.