Systemic misogyny exposed: Translating Rapeglish from the Manosphere with a Random Rape Threat Generator

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Abstract
Misogyny online in forms such as explicit rape threats has become so prevalent and rhetorically distinctive it resembles a new dialect or language. Much of this ‘Rapeglish’ is produced by members of an informal alliance of men’s groups online dubbed the ‘Manosphere’. As both a cyberhate researcher and cyberhate target, I have studied as well as contributed to feminist responses to Rapeglish. In 2016, for instance, I helped build a Random Rape Threat Generator (RRTG) – a computer program that splices, shuffles around, and re-stitches in novel combinations fragments of real-life Rapeglish to illustrate the formulaic, machine-like, and impersonal nature of misogynist discourse online. This article uses Yuri Lotman’s ideas about intra- and inter-cultural conflict involving something akin to the translation of a foreign language to frame the RRTG as one example of the way women are ‘talking back’ both to and with Rapeglish (the latter involving appropriations and subversions of the original discourse).

Keywords
cyberhate, feminism, Gamergate, Yuri Lotman, Manosphere, Men’s Rights Activists (MRA), Men’s Rights Movement (MRM), pick-up artists (PUAs), rape threats, trolling

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Introduction: taking misogyny online seriously (and sometimes also not-so-seriously)

Rapeglish: a definition

noun /ˌreɪp ɡlɪʃ/  
An emerging yet increasingly dominant online dialect whose signal characteristic is graphic and sexually violent imagery. Often accompanied by: accusations that female recipients are overweight, unattractive, and acceptably promiscuous; all-caps demands for intimate images; and strident denials that there is any misogyny on the internet whatsoever. Routinely deployed on hook-up apps and online dating sites in response to women who decline suave male overtures such as sending unsolicited penis portraits or using pick-up lines such as ‘If I flip a coin, what are the chances of me getting head?’ (Jane, 2017a)

In recent years, the term ‘Manosphere’ has been used in media domains and scholarship (Cohen, 2015; de Coning, 2016; Ging, 2017; Marche, 2016; Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016) to refer to a ‘loose confederacy’ (Ging, 2017: 1) of hard-line men’s rights and interest communities online. Despite some conflicting agendas and tribalism, these groups are united by an antagonism towards women, a vehement opposition to feminism, and the production of hyperbolic misogynist discourse involving the imagery of what Alex from A Clockwork Orange might call ‘ultraviolence’ (Burgess, 1962). In previous work (Jane, 2014a, 2016, 2017c), I have dubbed this discourse ‘Rapeglish’ because of its tenor of extreme sexual violence. Women’s responses to Rapeglish have changed over time and have included: expressions of shock and bewilderment; the collection and public display of representative examples; feminist analyses; and activism in forms such as awareness-raising, lobbying, and appropriating Rapeglish for targets’ own purposes. This article maps and analyses these changes, paying particular attention to the way some women have become so ‘proficient’ in Rapeglish, they are co-opting the discourse to engage in sombre political as well as humorously creative replies to the Manosphere.

The work of the Estonian-Russian semiotician Yuri M. Lotman (2000 [1990], 2005 [1984]) is useful as a conceptual lens for these phenomena because of his framing of language, cultural change, and meaning-making as involving a form of translation between clashing systems – in the case study under analysis, between women and the Manosphere. In this article, I use Lotman’s model to unpack the way iterations of Rapeglish have moved, like a conversation, between ‘core’ male ‘transmitters’ and ‘peripheral’ female ‘receivers’ in a manner which is transforming the discourse as well as unsettling the position the dialogue’s participants occupy in the semiosphere. The use of Lotman’s framing also permits a meta-analysis that positions the Random Rape Threat Generator (RRTG, see next section) – as well as this journal article itself – in stages three to five of Lotman’s five-stage ‘translation’ cycle as described in the section ‘Women respond’ below.

Background and methods

Data for this article is drawn from an ongoing series of studies which began formally in 2011 and which have been concerned with mapping and studying the history,
manifestations, nature, prevalence, aetiology, and consequences of gendered cyberhate. Theoretically, my hermeneutic is interdisciplinary and works across feminist theory (especially feminist standpoint theory), political philosophy, literary studies, cultural, media and gender studies, and action research (the latter being not so much a methodology as ‘an orientation towards inquiry’ that seeks to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing’ [Reason and Bradbury-Huang, 2008: 1, emphasis in original]). My methodologies are eclectic. For instance, I have used approaches from internet historiography to archive – since 1998 and on an ongoing basis – many thousands of reports of or incidences of gendered cyberhate in many domains. From 2015 through to 2017, I have also engaged in in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 52 Australian female targets of gendered cyberhate. A limitation to my research is that the qualitative dimensions of my work are entirely Anglophone. While the political intersectionality of gender with other social identities is indubitable, it is simply beyond the scope of my current research to investigate in any detail cyberhate as it relates to issues such as race, class, sexual orientation, and gender.

My research includes autoethnographic dimensions in that I have received a large volume of gendered cyberhate over nearly two decades. This began in 1998 when I was working as a columnist for the Australian print media. Shortly after adding my email address to the bottom of my newspaper columns, I began receiving large numbers of explicit, threatening, misogynist, and often bizarre messages from male-identifying readers, many of whom suggested I be subjected to various forms of rape as a corrective for my putative physical and intellectual deficiencies. Since making the transition to academia in 2011, I have continued to receive a steady stream of online abuse as well as being the target of various online ‘operations’ to have me sacked and/or my research funding withdrawn. A recent example involves a YouTube clip in which a man uses voice-changing software to dispute my case that there is a misogyny problem on the internet, before addressing me, quasi-directly, with, ‘Careful slut, them’s rapin words’ (cited in Jane, 2017b: 106). While such attacks are sometimes upsetting and anxiety-provoking, I often find the performative contradiction amusing. I am not alone. The American author and feminist commentator Lindy West, for instance, has also joked darkly about the fact that men who disagree with her case that there exists a violently misogynist ‘rape culture’ often prosecute their argument by threatening to rape, mutilate, and kill her – while simultaneously insisting she is actually too fat and ugly to rape (West, 2013).

My observation of and interest in the combined horror and humour of Rapeglish was part of what prompted me to collaborate with my colleague Nicole A Vincent to build an RRTG – a computer program that splices, shuffles around, and re-stitches in novel combinations fragments of real-life rape threats and sexualized vitriol drawn from my 18-year research archive. As I will explain in the section ‘Enter the RRTG’, the RRTG is actually three distinctly different generators. The version containing the largest and most complex sets of input data, the ‘Extended Remix’ has the ability to generate more than 80 billion unique examples of Rapeglish: that is, more than 23 examples of misogynist threats, messages, and/or aggressively entitled sleaze for every woman on earth. At first blush, it might seem odd for a feminist researcher to be adding yet more Rapeglish to the cybersphere. Yet, as I will explain, while the computer-generated mash-ups produced by the RRTG are a form of Rapeglish, it’s not as we’ve previously known it.
Overview

This article begins by introducing Lotman’s ideas about intra- and inter-cultural conflict and communication involving something akin to the translation of a foreign language, and as involving five stages which may, ultimately, have the potential to invert the power dynamics of the two groups in conflict (2000 [1990]: 146–7). This provides the conceptual framing for a discussion about the way three groups – subcultural trolling communities, the Men’s Rights Movement (MRM), and Pick-Up Artists (PUAs) – have coalesced to form the Rapeglish-producing Manosphere. I then outline the changing nature of women’s various responses, showing that these comport well (at least up until the final phase) with Lotman’s five-stage translation model. After providing a detailed account of the creation and function of the RRTG, I then highlight some limitations to Lotman’s framing with regard to Rapeglish, as well as some potential pitfalls for theorists using his work in other contexts. The latter relate to the temptation to overstate or overestimate the impact of oppressed people’s counter-speech to hegemonic power. For instance, despite many feminist subversions of and ‘replies’ to Rapeglish, members of the Manosphere have not been pushed out to the fringes of culture – as the fifth stage of Lotman’s process would have it – but are still giving the RRTG a run for its money in terms of producing ‘rapey’ texts.

Terms and definitions

Different scholars, journalists, and female targets have used different terms and definitions to describe various types of misogynist speech and acts online (Jane, 2017b: 7). In my own work, I use ‘gendered cyberhate’, ‘gendered e-bile’, ‘cyber violence against women and girls’ (‘cyber VAWG’), and ‘Rapeglish’ depending on the context and on which elements of the problem are under discussion. ‘Rapeglish’, for instance, is useful for bringing focus to the discursive components and functions of misogyny online. It is the primary term I will be using in this article. By my account, the term ‘Rapeglish’ incorporates – in addition to text-based threats and sexualized invective – image-based abuse, intimidation, and harassment such as pornographic photo manipulations (for example, photos of targets’ heads cut and pasted into explicit sex scenes), as well as the sending of unsolicited ‘dick pics’ (photos of men’s genitals) and ‘cum tributes’ (images taken by men after they have ejaculated onto women’s photos).

The relevance of Lotman on language

While misogyny is hardly new, the discourse and practices associated with the Manosphere have sufficiently novel components (see the section ‘The making of the Manosphere’) to make them worthy of consideration as distinctive, new iterations of misogyny. These, in turn, have prompted emerging forms of feminist counter-speech and resistance (see the section ‘Women respond’), as women take up discursive arms in this new front of the ongoing battle against systemic misogyny.

A number of theoretical lenses could prove fruitful for unpacking these phenomena. Contenders include: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s (1985) work on hegemonic
and counter-hegemonic blocs forming through strategic, discursively constructed alliances; and social movement theory accounts of the migration of activist groups and their ideas from the fringes of society to the mainstream (Klandermans and Staggenborg, 2002: x). In this article, however, I have elected to use Lotman’s semiotic theory of culture (2000 [1990], 2005 [1984]) because of the usefulness of his textured and diachronic focus on the operation and changing nature of combative language and practices produced by cultural factions in conflict. Especially cogent are his ideas about the way these factions interact with each other in a dynamic, interactive, and iterative process that changes over time and in a manner which may culturally relocate both the speech and the speakers.

For Lotman, the minimal condition for language (and, indeed, meaning itself) involves an ‘encounter between two “asymmetrical” systems at any scale’ (Hartley, 2017), neither of which speaks the other’s language in either a natural or semiotic sense. The subsequent ‘dialogues’ and ‘translations’ that occur may involve individuals (for example, a mother and an infant) or geo-historical cultural forces (for example, Italian and French culture prior to the Renaissance). While the semiosphere may give the ‘illusion of unification’, for Lotman there is an ‘us’ and ‘them’ approach to language depending on one’s location: ‘In the centre the metastructure is “our” language, but on the periphery it is treated as “someone else’s” language … like the grammar of a foreign language’ (2000 [1990]: 134). Conflict between the semiotic practices and norms associated with competing systems creates a semiotically dynamic zone and may involve an ‘aggressive upstage’ as marginal forms of culture move from the rebellious fringes to the centre where they might stand a chance of imposing their norms, agendas, and aesthetics on the broader semiosphere (Lotman, 2000 [1990]: 134). Lotman figures the rivalrous dialogue that takes place between the peripheries of cultural environments and the centre as involving five stages (2000 [1990]: 146–7), which Hartley (forthcoming) has since categorized as: (i) Strangeness, (ii) Transformation, (iii) Abstraction, (iv) Productivity, and (v) Transmission. I will outline some of the distinguishing features of these categories in relation to Rapeglish in the section ‘Women respond’ below.

The making of the Manosphere

The convergence of subcultural trolling communities, ultra-ist men’s rights groups, and PUAs into the franken-movement known as the Manosphere is itself a prime candidate for analysis using Lotman’s five-stage model. For the purposes of this article, however, I will simply sketch the emergence of the Manosphere, and the processes by which it – and its vernacular of Rapeglish – have come to occupy such central roles in the cybersphere.

Subcultural trolls

Subcultural trolling communities comprise (mostly) young male ‘geeks’ who initially gathered (mostly) in and around the ‘subreddit’ sections of the social news site Reddit, as well as the /b/ board of the imageboard site 4chan. The core constituents of these groups have tended to be awkward and socially marginalized ‘man-boys’ who use libertarian,
free speech arguments to assert their right to do or say anything, regardless of whether (arguably especially if) it causes harm (Beran, 2017). Discourse and practices associated with these groups include: an over-the-top ‘political incorrectness’ with regard to misogyny, sexual objectification, and racism; as well as a type of recreational nastiness/sadism. The latter involves enthused participants competing to see who can cause others the greatest amount of suffering, evidence of which is often circulated online in various ‘trophy’ forms (Jane, 2014a: 531–2). The growth of these subcultures has been exponential, and their cultural influence on the wider cybersphere enormous (Beran, 2017).

Men’s Rights Movement

The Manosphere’s second founding group skews older and involves a loose alliance of anti-feminist groups whose core grievance centres on the claim that it is men not women who are oppressed as a gender. The most public face – and so-called Gloria Steinem of the contemporary MRM – is the ‘deadbeat dad’ turned internet entrepreneur, Paul Elam, who runs the A Voice For Men (AVFM) website (Rensin, 2015; Serwer and Baker, 2015). Contributors to AVFM frequently deploy violent rhetoric in their focus on issues such as fathers’ rights, circumcision, antiabortion laws, allegedly female-perpetrated rape and violence, and, in particular, a supposed epidemic of ‘false rape claims’. Despite – or perhaps because of – his extremism, Elam has become a model for men dealing with difficult divorces, custody battles, and perceived female rejection. His argument is that masculine failures and disappointments are not the fault of individual men but have come about as a result of ‘institutionalized feminism’, a family court system ‘rigged against dutiful fathers’, and a world gripped by misandry (Serwer and Baker, 2015).

PUAs

‘Pick-up artist’ is a term used for heterosexual men who pursue large numbers of sexual conquests via manipulative, almost ritualistic techniques. A particularly infamous PUA is the ‘neomasculinist’ Daryush Valizadeh (aka Roosh V) who – in addition to monetizing the movement – has boasted of the many American ‘cunts’ he wants to ‘hate fuck’ (Broomfield, 2016; cited in Misogyny: The Sites, 2012). Valizadeh has suggested that the best way to stop rape is to make it legal if done on private property (though he has subsequently claimed his articulation of this view was just a thought experiment) (VR, 2015). While associated with more of a single-issue platform, PUAs share the previous two groups’ conspiracy-minded thinking about the reach and agenda of feminism. For instance, Valizadeh has called feminism a ‘war against men’, warning that, ‘Those who don’t pick up arms … will suffer most’ (cited in Broomfield, 2016).

The Manosphere

The three founding groups of the Manosphere have many commonalities. For instance, all have origins in social movements pre-dating the contemporary cybersphere, as well as membership bases with strong attachments to the identity of ‘underdog outsider’ in terms of being anti-establishment, anti-Left, anti-moral conservative, anti-clerical,
pro-libertarian, and so on. (These characteristics – along with the subcultural troll and MRM acceptance and/or embrace of a degree of fluidity with regard to male sexual preference – suggest that at least some characteristics of the Manosphere confound conventional academic-feminist theory with regard to hegemonic masculinity [Nagle, 2016].) Another strong commonality is a sense of masculine grievance and entitlement in relation to sex: specifically, the conviction that men have a right to sex with women, and that women derive power from exploiting men’s desires by cynically ‘withholding’ physical intimacy for the purposes of manipulation. (This view of sex involves an interesting variation on previous eras when dominant framings of the supposed mismatch between male and female sex drives tended to blame female ‘frigidity’ [Cryle and Moore, 2011].)

Of particular relevance to this article is the fact that subcultural trolls, the MRM, and PUAs have a history of producing Rapeglish utterances that are all but indistinguishable from each other. The significance of this phenomenon goes well beyond it merely being a practice these groups happen to have had in common. Building on Lotman’s work about new ideas emerging in the clash of difference between systems, Hartley notes that communication on these terms is social not individual in mode, that ‘Personal identity and knowledge alike grow out of group-belonging, sustained by semiotic networks’ (forthcoming). Thus the shared language of Rapeglish can be figured as having a central role in the melding of subcultural trolling communities, MRMs, PUAs, and other satellite movements into an entity that is intelligible as a single entity.

According to the Know Your Meme website, the first known use of the term ‘Manosphere’ to describe ‘an online network of men’s interest communities’ came in 2009 in the form of a blog called The Manosphere (Mansophere, n.d.). Three years later, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) used the term to refer to hundreds of websites, blogs and forums dedicated to ‘savaging’ women and feminists via ‘misogynistic attacks … astounding for the guttural hatred they express’ (Misogyny: The Sites, 2012). The SPLC pointed the finger at sites associated with subcultural trolling and PUAs, as well as at AVFM.

It is impossible to designate the precise moment the Manosphere – as identified by social observers and commentators such as those at Know Your Meme and the SPLC – moved from the peripheries of cyber culture to a more core location. My research on the history of misogyny online, however, indicates there was a clear tipping point around 2010 (Jane, 2017b: 22–8) – likely related to the advent of the Web 2.0’ era and the uptake of social media, in conjunction with enduring systemic misogyny (as evidenced by the fact that men continue to hold a disproportionate share of political, economic, and social power, with some using various forms of violence against women to maintain the inequitable status quo [Jane, 2017b: 43–4]).

By the time of GamerGate in 2014, the power and core cultural positionality of the Manosphere was well established (Jane, 2017b: 5) such that hyperbolic misogyny has been normalized to the point where graphic rape threats have gone ‘viral’, becoming an all-purpose response for men wanting to object to what a woman says, does, or looks like online, or who wish to register their outrage at being romantically or sexually ignored or snubbed (Jane, 2017b: 3). Importantly, there has been a mainstream uptake of this discourse such that it is being deployed by men who are not necessarily identified with any of the founding groups or current concerns of the Manosphere.
Women respond

In this section I focus on women’s responses to and ‘dialogues’ with Rapeglish using Lotman’s model as a frame of analysis. As mentioned above, when a new text crosses the border from one semiosphere to another, we can identify five stages of translation and transformation: (i) Strangeness, (ii) Transformation, (iii) Abstraction, (iv) Productivity, and (v) Transmission. The process begins with the reception of a foreign text, and ends with the transmission of new texts back across the boundary. In this section I show, stage by stage, the way that – after a period of head-shaking incomprehension – women have become ‘fluent’ in Rapeglish, and are deconstructing, restructuring, and broadcasting the discourse in new forms for their own political, creative, entertainment, and personal purposes.

(i) Strangeness: For Lotman, texts arriving from the ‘centre’ during the first stage of the translation process seem alien. They are read in the ‘foreign’ language; are regarded as representing a break from the past; and may be over-valued because they are unfamiliar (Lotman, 2000 [1990]: 146). My own experiences as an early target of Rapeglish resonate strongly with this framing. When I first began receiving ‘all feminists should be gang raped to set them right’ emails as a print media columnist in the late 1990s, I was gobsmacked by the weirdness of the rhetoric, and also by the extraordinary disconnect between the content of the writing to which correspondents were putatively objecting and the content of the material they sent in response. For example, a Socratic analysis of the tyranny of the majority involved in the Australian electoral system (Tom, 2004) prompted an email specifying the hours of non-consensual ‘pile-driven arse fucking’ I should be subjected to on a daily basis.

Then, in 2011, a large number of women from different nations and social contexts simultaneously began speaking out – in bewilderment and revulsion – about the hyperbolic misogyny they had begun receiving over the internet. Like a foreign-language film screened without subtitles, at this stage Rapeglish was mostly cited in baffled confusion, as recipients and commentators struggled to even find a name for the extraordinarily violent discourse they were receiving via the internet. Was it hating? Trolling? Heckling? Cyber-bile? A ‘cyber-firing line’? A ‘flame war’? A new type of ‘war of words’ in the Wild West of the internet? (Jackman, 2011). In 2011, I suggested ‘Rapeglish’ as a possible descriptor (Jane, 2014a). Here it is worth noting that while Rapeglish did retain its strangeness during these early citations, the relocation of privately received messages into public contexts marked a clear first step in terms of the transformation of the discourse.

(ii) Transformation: For Lotman, a signal characteristic of this second stage involves the ‘home’ culture seeing the ‘imported’ texts in historical context, in terms of restoring links with the past and looking for ‘roots’ (2000 [1990]: 146–7). With regard to Rapeglish, after an initial period of perplexity, recipients and commentators began discussing the discourse as being not (or at least not only) an inexplicable and novel techno-phenomenon, but a new manifestation of old misogyny. In addition to looking back and situating Rapeglish historically (temporal length), female interlocutors during this period also identified individual instances of Rapeglish as being part of a larger phenomenon (contextual breadth). The UK writer Laurie Penny drew parallels with the ubiquity of victim-blaming associated with offline sexual violence when she suggested that a woman’s
opinion had become the ‘short skirt of the internet’ in that ‘having one and flaunting it is somehow asking an amorphous mass of almost-entirely male keyboard-bashers to tell you how they’d like to rape, kill and urinate on you’ (Penny, 2011).

For Lotman, this second stage also involves the ‘imported’ texts and the ‘home’ culture beginning to restructure each other, and to create a multiplicity of translations, imitations, and adaptations (2000 [1990]: 146–7). We can see this occurring by way of feminists beginning to use humour in (re)citations of and meta discussions about Rapeglish. An example involves the Australian stand-up comedian Hannah Gadsby who, during a televised performance in 2014, noted that, after an earlier television appearance, she had received a message saying: ‘You fat, ugly, bitch. You wouldn’t be raped in a men’s prison on a Saturday night’ (Gadsby, 2014). Gadsby agreed she was fat, but questioned the man’s assumption that days of the week are relevant in terms of prison recreational activities. She mimicked a possible inmate of this penitentiary, enthusing: ‘Oh I can’t wait for Saturday night. It’s craft and rape night’ (Gadsby, 2014).

While previous discussions had mostly involved paraphrasing or citing Rapeglish examples in text form, another development during this stage involved targets reposting actual screenshots of comments which, among other things, offered outsiders access to previously inaccessible (and potentially mock-worthy) aspects of the discourse such as odd syntax, presentation errors, and farcical spelling. West, for instance, posted a number of screenshots of YouTube and Twitter comments she had received such as: ‘Fat, Ugly, Angry, No man in her life, This is the conclusion.’! (cited in West, 2013, presentation idiosyncrasies in original). These screenshots were accompanied by a video of West reading hateful messages aloud in a dry monotone – another new type of feminist ‘performance’ of Rapeglish.

(iii) Abstraction: In this phase of Lotman’s model, the rules and codes of ‘foreign’ texts rather than their surface performance are foregrounded, and the ‘idea takes hold that “over there” these ideas were realized in an “untrue”, confused or distorted, form’ (2000 [1990]: 147). With regard to Rapeglish, we can witness a shift from the citing of seemingly random examples to the presentation of large archives that have been subject to – and enable others to – engage in thematic analysis. For example, the feminist blogger Sady Doyle invited women to retweet their abuse using the #MenCallMeThings hashtag on Twitter, and then used contributions to identify a number of central themes and subthemes. Her conclusion, and it is one I share, is that the ‘overwhelmingly impersonal, repetitive, stereotyped quality’ of the abuse shows the discourse is not about individual targets but about gender (Doyle, 2011).

(iv) Productivity: For Lotman, stage four involves the dissolving of ‘imported’ texts into the ‘receiving’ culture (2000: 147). The latter then begins producing new texts based on cultural codes which have been transformed ‘into a new and original structural model’ (Lotman, 2000: 147). With regard to Rapeglish, we can see an increasing number of feminist ‘translations’ and performances of altered versions of the discourse. An example is the Australian feminist Clementine Ford’s vigorous critique of those misogynists online who still consider themselves to be ‘nice’, ‘decent’ men:

Oh but don’t worry, they’re all Good Guys…. It doesn’t matter that they tell sexist jokes and tell women to get back into the kitchen, to stop overreacting, to be less irrational, are you sad
love just because you can’t get a root, you need a good root, if you weren’t so ugly maybe you could get a root, I’d throw you a root but even I’m not that generous, you just need a good dick up ya, I bet you’d jibber less if you had a cock in your mouth, you big fucking lesbian dyke, man-hater, fuck you, you fat bitch, dog, whore, slut, cunt. (Ford, 2015)

Here we can see Ford not citing directly or paraphrasing a single, identifiable message but producing her own stream of Rapeglish to make a political point.

On Twitter, meanwhile, the Australian writer and comedian Rebecca Shaw launched a parody account called @NoToFeminism to satirize various aspects of misogyny, including the frequency with which Rapeglish producers misspell ‘feminism’ while attacking it. Tweets from Shaw’s account – in which she impersonates a female defender of the Manosphere – include: ‘I don’t need feminism i love seeing lively debate online!!!! between one woman on twitter & hundreds of men threatening to rape and kill her’; ‘I don’t need feminism i wish feminisits would just CALM DOWN & stop being HYSTERICAL & be more like men! who send death threats over video games’; and ‘I don’t need feminism if women REALLY didn’t want to be harassed by men online they would just stop using the Internet and go live in a tree’ (Shaw, n.d.). The comedian Amy Schumer, meanwhile, broadcast a sketch involving the introduction of a fictional ‘I’m Going to Rape and Kill You’ social media button in order to ‘lessen the burden of typing those seven words out individually for the thousands of male internet users who express the sentiment on a daily basis’ (cited in Provenzano, 2016). This, it was said, would free additional characters for men to make other comments about women such as ‘what ugly sluts they are’ (cited in Provenzano, 2016).

Dark humour has also been deployed in response to men sending women unsolicited photos of their genitals. A compilation of the ‘best reactions women ever had to unwanted dick pics’ includes a woman suggesting sending back ‘a picture of a better looking dick…. A more photogenic dick. A dick with a future’ (@simonefiasco cited in Boone, 2015). The freelance writer Sarah-Louise Jordan, meanwhile, composed a beautifully formal letter on Facebook, thanking her correspondent for ‘the unexpected and unsolicited submission’ of his ‘penis portrait for our consideration’ (cited in Hirsh, 2016). Jordan goes on to regretfully inform the human man attached to this penis that unfortunately his submission has failed to pass ‘our most basic standards of quality control at this time’. She does, however, offer to provide (for a nominal fee) a report to assist in the cultivation of important skills such as ‘how to appear as though you weren’t raised by wolves’ and ‘how to dress your penis for social media (a rough guide to pants)’ (cited in Hirsh, 2016).

(v) Transmission: In Lotman’s fifth phase, ‘the dialogic turn-taking process’ reverses its polarity (Hartley, forthcoming) as the previously outlying, receiving culture becomes the transmitting culture. Now located at ‘the general centre of the semiosphere’, the latter issues forth ‘a flood of texts directed to other, peripheral areas of the semiosphere’ (Lotman, 2000 [1990]: 147). With regard to Rapeglish, we can certainly observe a flood of feminist texts being produced and transmitted to new audiences. We can also see: (1) that very large numbers of people are viewing these new texts; and (2) that there is a growing mainstream uptake of the view that Rapeglish exists, and is potentially violent and harmful. For evidence of (1), consider the 4.2 million YouTube viewers who have watched a public service clip involving real examples of cyberhate being read aloud to
female sports journalists (‘#MoreThanMean – Women in sports “face” harassment’, 2016). For evidence of (2), consider the release, in 2015, of a United Nations (UN) Broadband Commission report acknowledging: that women are 27 times more likely to be abused online than men; that 61 per cent of online harassers are male; and that women aged between 18 and 24 are at particular risk (Tandon et al., 2015: 15).

That said, when we compare Lotman’s model with the real-life case study of Rapeglish, we can see that his abstraction only partly holds once stage five is reached. That is, while transmission is definitely occurring, there has not been a reversal in terms of the relative cultural marginality of Rapeglish targets and the relative cultural centrality of Rapeglish producers. This observation is not intended as a criticism of Lotman’s work. He himself acknowledges that his model is ‘highly schematic’ and that its various stages may have overlaps, and might not necessarily occur sequentially or to neat completion (2000 [1990]: 147, 150). It does, however, highlight the importance of giving due recognition and consideration to the gaps between theoretical apparatus and objects of analysis lest we risk overplaying the gains achieved by counter-speech from the margins (in this case, from Rapeglish targets as representatives of the far larger problem of gendered violence), and underplaying the possibly continuing hegemonic status of those forces occupying the cultural core (in this case, the Manosphere as a representative of the patriarchy). I will return to these issues in the conclusion. In the meantime, I will describe the rationale and operation of the RRTG, explaining the way it can be seen as spanning phases three, four and (partially) five of Lotman’s model.

Enter the RRTG (though only at your own risk)

At the point my research entered what can be figured as Lotman’s third (i.e. abstraction) phase, from about 2011 onwards, I began highlighting the quasi-algebraic qualities of Rapeglish, that is, the way the names of senders and receivers could be substituted infinitely without affecting the structure of the discourse (Jane, 2014b: 559). I also noted that the acts supposedly ‘provoking’ misogynist attacks were interchangeable, in that a woman could receive a near-identical spray of rape threats for commenting about basketball games, bike riding, comic book covers, soft pretzels recipes, DIY fishtail braid videos on YouTube, and on and on ad infinitum (Jane, 2017b: 41). Further, after looking at hundreds of messages received by hundreds of different women, I had noticed that these very quickly started to look virtually indistinguishable. That is, despite enormous variation in the cultural, political, geographical, and temporal contexts of female targets, the style and content of the messages themselves were strikingly similar. (This is not to elide the fact, however, that women of colour, Muslim women, queer women, and women from other marginalized or oppressed social groups are targeted for particularly vicious attacks in that threats of sexual violence are routinely combined with extreme racism, homophobia, and so on.)

For the most part Rapeglish involved attacks on women for allegedly being:

- unattractive (‘fat’ and ‘ugly’ being the most common adjectives deployed);
- too sexual (‘sluts’) and/or not sexual enough (‘withholding’ sex as a weapon); and/or
• some combination of unintelligent, mentally ill, narcissistic, politically misguided, anti-libertarian, guilty of misandry, a member of an inferior gender, etcetera.

As per my own experience with Rapeglish, coerced sex acts – evoked via hyperbolic, violent, and explicit imagery – were routinely prescribed as all-purpose correctives.

The surreal, mechanistic qualities of Rapeglish reminded me of the odd material produced by online generators such as the Postmodern Essay Generator, the Adolescent Poetry Generator, and the Brooklyn Bar Menu Generator. These computer programs work by cutting and pasting textual fragments to produce humorous randomness based on a range of pre-determined parameters. The trend is reminiscent of Cubism-, Dada-, Futurism-, and Surrealism-inspired literary techniques such as cut-up, in which a text is sliced, diced, and randomly reassembled to form odd juxtapositions (William S Burroughs being one of the most famous exponents). I began wondering whether it might be possible to create something similar using Rapeglish: that is, to design and build a generator which was creative and potentially amusing in its use of the aesthetics of arbitrariness, yet which also made serious points about the formulaic, machine-like, and impersonal nature of the discourse. This shift from archiving and analysis to subversive repurposing was the point at which my own work began aligning with Lotman’s fourth stage, that is, productivity.

The first blueprint of the RRTG appeared in book form as a spreadsheet of potential input data drawn from real-life examples of Rapeglish (see Figure 1) (Jane, 2017b: 37– 9). I then enlisted the assistance of a digital-savvy academic colleague – Vincent – to develop a computer program which made use of curated material from my entire research archive, and which would also have the capacity to incorporate new examples of Rapeglish on an ongoing basis.

Vincent’s role was to develop and finesse various aspects of the coding and design elements of the RRTG. I, meanwhile, focused on collating, coding, parsing the input data, and writing 15,000 words of surrounding text. The latter included extensive detail on methodology, as well as information about and analyses of the broader problem of gendered cyberhate. Vincent and I then began sending out a number of ‘beta’ versions of the generator to an eight-person team of ‘peer reviewers’ – a group including academics, coders, digital design artists, and cyberhate targets. Initially, we received overwhelmingly negative feedback. The main criticism was that our early versions were too visually static, as well as too complex and difficult to understand. In short, they indicated that we had failed to achieve our central goal, which was to communicate a semiotically sophisticated point about the underlying, linguistic ‘ones and zeros’ of Rapeglish very quickly to broad audiences.

Concerned about sacrificing nuance for impact, we eventually produced three distinct versions of the RRTG in two separate but linked websites: a simple animated GIF; a ‘Radio Edit’ version, and an ‘Extended Remix’ version. The ‘Radio Edit’ version of the RRTG is located on the first webpage at which visitors arrive after they have clicked through a warning about the site’s explicit, violent, and racist content. It uses an animation which ‘spins’ three columns of text like a slot machine, borrowing and re-deploying existing code used on the Mr William Shakespeare’s Insult Generator. Vincent’s program randomly generates fragments of real-life Rapeglish in three categories: a threat, an
adjective and a noun. For example: ‘My cousin will come and slit your throat and rape you’ (threat) ‘You bespectacled’ (adjective) ‘hooker’ (noun). New messages are generated each time users click on a ‘button’ beneath the generator reading ‘The messages I get are rapier than that’ (see Figure 2).

The animated GIF – the simplest version of the generator – appears on a page called ‘Hateful Gibberish’ and involves a grid in which various fragments of text in columns appear in bold to show the interchangeable nature of the message components (see Figure 3).

The Extended Remix (see Figure 4) contains much more data and many more sections than the other two models. The first section of randomly generated text in this version responds to the question ‘Wot his lady problem?’ and is made up of paraphrased material drawn from real-life scenarios and contexts. It demonstrates the disconnect between what Rapeglish producers can perceive as problematic and how they respond: that is, it shows that who targets are and what they are supposed to have done wrong (or to have ‘asked for’) is irrelevant. The next section responds to the question ‘Wot he say her?’ The input data used here is all real-life material, cut and pasted for the most part without alteration from its original contexts. Text in the ‘Wot he say her?’ section is randomly generated from five input data sets: two for propositional content; one for adjectives; one for nouns; and one for sign-offs. The final section responds to the question ‘Wot he do

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**Figure 1.** The first blueprint of the RRTG.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>salutation</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>punctuation (optional)</td>
<td>traditional phrase</td>
<td>outcome part one</td>
<td>outcome part two</td>
<td>rationale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuck you, you</td>
<td>unrapeable</td>
<td>cunt</td>
<td></td>
<td>I hope you</td>
<td>die of passy cancer while your children watch as I split on your ass</td>
<td>coz you're a stupid feminist asshole.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat my cock</td>
<td>worthless</td>
<td>bitch</td>
<td></td>
<td>soon you will</td>
<td>take a bath with a trainer</td>
<td>coz you're asking for it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kill yourself, you</td>
<td>delusional</td>
<td>e-stank</td>
<td></td>
<td>we will ensure</td>
<td>despise a charming, like we can sum in what's left of your cock-stuffed penis</td>
<td>coz you don't know shit.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your mother sucks cock in hell, you</td>
<td>ugly</td>
<td>attention</td>
<td></td>
<td>it's just a matter of time if you</td>
<td>go to jail and get an backed up by a demon</td>
<td>coz you're an ugly fucking cunt.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'd never bang you, you</td>
<td>obese</td>
<td>dyse</td>
<td></td>
<td>ima make sure</td>
<td>choke on my cock while I shoot a hot load into the wound</td>
<td>coz you're a stroking bitch.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello, you</td>
<td>slutty</td>
<td>piece of shit</td>
<td></td>
<td>what you deserve is to</td>
<td>have your arse split by my cock while your vagina isn't being used for shit</td>
<td>coz you're a piecemeal tramp.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen up, you</td>
<td>hysterical</td>
<td>scrubmuffin etc</td>
<td></td>
<td>me and my friends will laugh</td>
<td>take a thick rope and put it round your neck on account of your epic unfuckability</td>
<td>coz you're a cum-guzzling bimbo.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fucking shut it, you</td>
<td>unfuckable</td>
<td>heifer</td>
<td></td>
<td>the internet will watch while you</td>
<td>taint your tail off my dick to pull an end to your bitching bullshit</td>
<td>coz of your whore face.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hey, you</td>
<td>bitter</td>
<td>hole</td>
<td></td>
<td>get back in the kitchen and drink beach while anal sex wiped the smirk off your face</td>
<td>coz you need an attitude adjustment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You need</td>
<td>misandrist</td>
<td>haig</td>
<td></td>
<td>9000 pennies will fuckyou</td>
<td>get raped to death with a goringbitch</td>
<td>coz you're a stupid little girl.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick, you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>while you</td>
<td>then I'll go hang your slut daughter</td>
<td>coz you're trash taking footmeat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wassup, you</td>
<td>castrating</td>
<td>retard</td>
<td></td>
<td>make me a samich as you</td>
<td>have your head removed</td>
<td>coz you're a stupid little girl.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
next?’. In addition to more iterations of Rapeglish, this part includes some disturbing (and on occasion criminal) real-life examples of follow-up contact with Rapeglish targets in offline contexts. Textual fragments for each of the Extended Remix’s sections and sub-sections are contained in seven data set files, all of which are accessible via links on an input data page.\textsuperscript{13}

With regard to Lotman’s model, the RRTG’s transmission of texts (that is, stage five) occurs every time someone visits the site, and then again every time a visitor clicks on the ‘button’ to generate a new example of Rapeglish. Transmission is also occurring on a meta level in that, in the lead up to and since launching the site in January 2017, I have spoken and written about it, and the social problem to which it responds (examples include Jane, 2016 and Jane, 2017d, as well as this article).

From a research outcome perspective, the RRTG is a hybrid beast in that it has been designed to function as: a scholarly research output; a creative work drawing on cut-up traditions from fiction and the visual arts; a pedagogical tool; and an ongoing data collection mechanism (in that users are invited to ‘donate’ their own Rapeglish for potential inclusion in the generator).\textsuperscript{14} It also offers – in a novel format – a large, publicly

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure2.png}
\caption{The ‘\textquotesingle Radio Edit\textquotesingle version of the RRTG.}
\end{figure}
accessible archive of Rapeglish of potential use to other researchers, students, activists, and stakeholders. Furthermore, the humorous visual aesthetics and interactive animation are designed to convey ideas difficult to communicate via more traditional scholarly forms.

In addition to raising public awareness, an important dimension of the RRTG’s activism-related aims is to demonstrate that while the rhetoric in individual messages might seem horribly personal, such material is indeed first and foremost about gender rather than about any individual woman and what she may or may not have done. My hope is that making this point in a striking and impactful way may assist in shifting the focus from blaming victims (by pondering what they might have said or done to incite someone to treat them like that) to making attackers accountable, as well as possibly providing some consolation and humorous relief for Rapeglish targets. Threatening and abusive cyberhate often arrives on women’s personal devices when they are in private spaces, and many of the women I have interviewed for my research report feeling isolated, vulnerable, afraid, and even ashamed. My hope is that the RRTG helps remind targets that they are not the only ones getting ‘sit on a knife’ messages, and that, while the technology may be new, the lascivious contempt and threats of sexualized violence proliferating...
on the internet have their roots in much older misogynistic traditions. These realizations alone obviously won’t solve the larger problem but they might provide a reassuring sense of community, support, and perspective. Speaking personally, building this site has certainly felt like an empowering experience. For me, it has been a way of documenting and making sense of my journey from a place where I felt like I was being yelled at in a foreign language, to joining the increasing number of women who are appropriating Rapeglish and retransmitting it in transgressive new forms that are intended to serve the agendas of feminism rather than the Manosphere.

**Conclusion**

While the work of Lotman offers a useful conceptual framing for tracking and unpacking the changing nature of both misogynist discourse online and meta conversations about misogynist discourse online, this article is testimony to the fact that his five-stage model does not map perfectly onto the case study of Rapeglish. It is true that the plight of women targeted for misogyny online is more visible as a consequence of the processes described in the section ‘Women respond’ above. Yet while this does represent a win from the margins, it is not a win of sufficient magnitude to allow us to state that the men
of the Manosphere have been dethroned and banished from their central territory online, and/or that this core kingdom is now occupied by newly empowered Rapeglish targets. If anything, the Rapeglish being broadcast from the Manosphere seems to be getting louder and more prevalent in response to feminist counter-speech (Jane, 2017b: esp.: 3, 13–14, 35).

Caution is therefore recommended when using Lotman’s model in case the enthusiastic (and optimistic) theorist notices a cultural ‘dialogue’ progressing through some or even most of the stages of the schematic model, and assumes these will automatically continue to a fifth stage in which a previously inequitable cultural arrangement is inverted. Such an approach might inadvertently endorse a teleological outlook with regard to social change and/or mistake resistance – the possibility of which is always likely to accompany relations of power15 – for some sort of ultimate victory. This sort of triumph has not occurred in relation to feminist counter-speech to Rapeglish specifically, nor in terms of feminist resistance to gender-based inequity, oppression, and violence more generally.

It is well beyond the scope of this article (or, indeed, my own intellectual resources) to propose a feminist strategy that might have more success at metaphorically neutering the Manosphere’s more toxic elements. However, the fact that speaking back to the patriarchy using its own – or any other – language has thus far had only limited success is not a good reason to critique feminist methods or to imply that these have no political use at all. Instead it should be used to draw attention to the power and perniciousness of systemic misogyny, and the continuing, pressing need for multifaceted institutional support of feminist efforts.

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Notes

1. For details and examples of other academics being attacked in this way, see Phipps (2014) and Barlow and Awan (2016).
2. For the sake of simplicity, in this article I will use the singular term ‘RRTG’ to refer to all three versions of the RRTG described in the section ‘Enter the RRTG’.
3. See: www.rapethreatgenerator.com/extended
4. See also Shaw (2012) on discursive activism, and Bennett and Segerberg (2013) on connective action.
5. Here I am using the slang prefix ‘franken-’ to refer to something involving ‘a hybrid of disparate parts’ (Franken-, n.d.).
6. Subcultural trolling grew out of 1960s counterculturalism and the libertarianism of the early web (Jane, 2017b: 45–51); the MRM has its roots in 1970s men’s rights movements; and the
origins of the PUA community date back at least to Eric Weber’s 1971 book How to Pick Up Girls! – since dubbed ‘one of the most influential works in douchebag history’ (Aran, 2015).

7. The term ‘Web 2.0’ refers to changes in the web – from around 2006 – which facilitate user-generated content, interactivity, collaboration, and sharing.

8. ‘GamerGate’ is the term used to describe the large-scale attacks on women in gaming, and then women and ‘social justice warriors’ in general, from late 2014 onwards. For a detailed account, see Jane (2017b: 28–34).


11. See, respectively: www.rapethreatgenerator.com; www.rapeglish.com; and www.rapethreat-generator.com/extended

12. See: http://insult.dream40.org/

13. See: www.rapethreatgenerator.com/data

14. See: www.rapethreatgenerator.com/contact

15. This reflects the Foucauldian view of power and resistance (Foucault and Kritzman, 1990: 123).

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