



‘Dude ... stop the spread’: antagonism, agonism, and #manspreading on social media

Emma A Jane

University of New South Wales, Australia

Abstract

Feminist campaigns on social media platforms have recently targeted ‘manspreading’ – a portmanteau describing men who sit in a way which fills multiple seats on public transport. Feminists claim this form of everyday sexism exemplifies male entitlement and have responded by posting candid online photographs of men caught manspreading. These ‘naming and shaming’ digilante strategies have been met with vitriolic responses from men’s rights activists. This article uses debates around manspreading to explore and appraise some key features of contemporary feminist activism online. Given the heat, amplification, and seemingly intractable nature of the argument, it investigates the usefulness of Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism to unpack the conflict. Ultimately, however, agonistic theory is found to have limits – in terms of this case study as well as more broadly. Some final thoughts are offered on how feminists might best navigate the pitfalls of online activism – including the problem of ‘false balance’ – going forward.

Keywords

agonism, democracy, digilantism, false balance, feminism, gender, manspreading, men’s rights activism, Chantal Mouffe, social media

Since around 2012, feminist activists have targeted the practice of ‘manspreading’ – a neologism used to refer to men who sit with their legs in a wide v-shape filling two or three single seats on public transport. The feminist case is that manspreading

Corresponding author:

Emma A Jane, School of Arts and Media, University of NSW, Sydney, NSW, 2052, Australia.
Email: ej@emmajane.info

is not just a failure of etiquette, but a blatant example of the sorts of ‘everyday’ sexism suffered by women as a result of men’s inflated sense of entitlement. As such, manspreading is framed as a powerful – yet also ridiculous – symbol of what is argued to be men’s tendency to take up more than their fair share of literal and metaphorical social space.

A key component of activism in this domain has involved feminists taking candid photographs of male commuters engaged in manspreading and posting these images on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. Many of the male subjects are identifiable and appear alongside mocking captions and comments. These ‘naming and shaming’ digilante strategies have been met with heated and at times vitriolic responses from men’s rights activists who condemn what they say is sexist ‘male-bashing’ (Geoff Stone cited in Yuen, 2014). Men have returned fire by posting photographs of women taking up multiple seats on public transport with their bodies, and/or hand luggage, accompanied by claims that it is actually males, not females, who are the subjects of systemic, gender-based oppression.

Anti-manspreading activism is revealing because it sheds light on some key features of contemporary feminist practice, especially in cyber domains. The ferocity and mimetic nature of the response from men’s rights activists, meanwhile, raises questions about how ‘the political’ (Mouffe, 2005b: 9) plays out online, given the frequency with which arguments can escalate into what might appear to be interminable shouting matches. As such, this article investigates those aspects of cyber conflict that are suggestive of non-engagement or talking past one another, thereby contributing to broader conversations about how activism and political debates might best be conducted (and also appraised) going forwards.

I begin by offering a brief genealogy (cf. Foucault, 1977; Koopman, 2013) of manspreading, as well as what could be called ‘womanshrinking’, that is, the tendency for females to sit in closed and constricted positions. I then provide an overview of research from social and applied psychology showing the complex relationships between body positions and power. These investigations into the practices – and the histories of the practices – of body positions pave the way for assessing the relative coherence of the conflicting cases made about manspreading. The heated exchanges between feminists and men’s rights activists – as well as the tit-for-tat ‘digilantism’ – are also used to demonstrate the way online debates can involve a series of escalating hostilities in which antagonists appear to increasingly mirror each other.

Given the fierceness and seemingly intractable nature of the conflict, I follow a number of other digital cultures scholars in exploring the usefulness of Chantal Mouffe’s (1996, 1999, 2005a, 2005b, 2009, 2013a, 2013b) work on agonistic pluralism as a theoretical lens for unpacking and analysing online dispute. While aspects of agonistic theory do prove useful in this case study, I identify some logistical and epistemic issues which make it difficult to determine whether the manspreading conflict is a form of: (1) productive and democratic *agonism*; or (2) unproductive and potentially destructive *antagonism*. This suggests the adversary/enemy distinction in agonistic theory merits further scrutiny, as well as raising larger questions about the degree to which agonistic theory is normatively useful. I then explain how the insights gained from these analyses might inform and assist future feminist projects going forwards.

This article draws on research I have conducted as part of a much larger, ongoing study into gender, hostility, and feminist activism online. I have been tracking and archiving media texts relating to these topics since 1998. Data collection for the manspreading case study was conducted primarily from September 2013 to November 2015. I used a range of methods to track relevant media discourse in Anglophone domains including the ‘Google Alerts’ service¹ which provides daily notifications of relevant content from news sites, blogs, and other sources. My archiving and web capture methods are guided by approaches from the emerging field of internet historiography (Brügger, 2010), although these methods sit within an overarching commitment to formulating the sorts of ‘critical histories of the present’ enabled by Foucauldian genealogy (Koopman, 2013: 24). To analyse debates around manspreading, I draw on textual analysis and media ethnography as well as an interdisciplinary hermeneutic working across political philosophy, cultural and media studies, and gender and feminist theory. I am influenced by standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) in that my research is intended to contribute to the broad feminist project of advancing gender equity.

In this article, I am defining ‘digilantism’ as involving putatively politically motivated extrajudicial practices in online domains that are intended to punish or bring others to account in response to a perceived or actual lack of institutional remedies. These include acts which are illegal or legally liminal, as well as practices which are legal and are therefore more akin to other types of advocacy or activism such as awareness raising and lobbying. While digilantism is becoming increasingly common as a feminist tactic online (Jane, 2016, 2017), the novelty and emergent nature of this type of activism has received little scholarly coverage and cannot be easily conceptualised or theorised via the existing cyberactivism literature. As such, this is an area which would benefit from more scholarly attention in future.

While research into expansive body postures suggests the act of manspreading is a cross-cultural phenomenon (Davis and Weitz, 1981), anti-manspreading activism has occurred primarily in the US, and to a lesser extent in the UK, Canada, and Australia. An exception to this western focus is the ‘Close Your Legs’ campaign launched by the Istanbul Feminist Collective in Turkey in 2014 (Alfred, 2014). That said, there may well be other campaigns in other nations of which I am unaware because of the Anglophone focus of this study. Further, the transnational nature of the internet can make it difficult to determine the nation-state origins of contributors to online fora.

Men spreading and women shrinking

While the term ‘manspreading’ is new, men sitting in public places with their legs at obtuse angles is a practice that pre-dates the portmanteau. Indeed, as part of recent media coverage of the phenomenon, *Mashable* published a collection of classical art featuring portraits of male kings, musicians, and public figures sitting with their legs splayed widely while women, servants, and other citizens of lesser status compress themselves so as to take up less space than the central male subjects (Romano, 2015). In scholarly domains, cross-cultural surveys of sitting and standing positions have also found that various spread-legged positions (also referred to as ‘genitalia displays’) and other wide

movements and body positions are more common among males than among females (Davis and Weitz, 1981: 81, 83, 89).

In contrast, there has existed a long-standing social imperative for girls and women to adopt constricted and closed positions, and to avoid any public activities that even hint at straddling. This has been framed as being necessary to – among other objectives – preserve sexual innocence, maintain reproductive health, and uphold decorum. An example is the way that, after centuries of women riding horses astride, sidesaddle riding became an unquestioned standard of common decency after it was introduced in England in 1382, supposedly to protect the hymens of royal brides in transit (O'Reilly, 2014). In the 19th century, women were even required to play the cello in a 'side-saddle' position (Macleod, 1993). The cardinal rules of child-rearing in that era 'forbade girls to straddle any object', including hobby horses, stick horses, bicycles, and seesaws (Karin Calvert cited in Garvey, 1995: 74). The American etiquette author Emily Post, meanwhile, provides near mathematically precise guidance on how to sit gracefully while female:

The proper way for a lady to sit is in the center of her chair ... her hands relaxed in her lap, her knees together, or if crossed, her foot must not be thrust forward so as to leave a space between the heel and her other ankle. (1922)

While such advice may now seem humorously dated, empirical data shows that women's sitting positions in the present era continue to align with the sorts of constricted poses Post deems ladylike (Vrugt and Luyerink, 2000).

To further understand the gendered dimensions of these patterns in sitting positions and postures, we can look to social and applied psychology research showing that women and men's different sitting styles have close and complex relations with power. Open and expansive body positions, for instance, are characteristics of dominant individuals, while submissive people take up less space by contracting their postures, sitting with closed arm and leg positions, and using diminutive, if any, gestures (Burgoon and Dunbar, 2006: 289). The prerogatives associated with power also mean people may exercise their 'right' to behave in certain ways regardless of the social expectations involved in a given context. Thus someone who sits in a position which occupies more than a single seat on public transport can be seen not only as engaging in the dominance marker of commanding space, but as doing so in a manner which reflects a sense of entitlement 'to deviate from norms and expectations' (Burgoon and Dunbar, 2006: 289).

Furthermore, embodied cognition research reveals that adopting an expansive or 'power' posture *stimulates* rather than merely *reflects* a state of dominance. In other words, the links between expansive body posture and power are co-constitutive. Experiments conducted by Dana R. Carney et al. show that 'high-power nonverbal displays' cause physiological, psychological, and behavioural changes in both females and males, including elevations of the hormone testosterone, reduction of the stress hormone cortisol, and increased feelings of power and tolerance for risk (2010: 1366). While high-power positions have a positive effect on emotions, thoughts, and memories, low-power positions such as slumping and slouching are associated with a decrease in subjective energy levels, and an increase in mood states such as depression (Peper and Lin, 2012). Other research suggests that posture matters even more than role when determining

thought and behaviour (Huang et al., 2011: 100). We can see, therefore, that the different body poses adopted by women and men in shared public spaces is fertile ground for feminist critique because these positions can be framed as being both diagnostic and constitutive of gender-related power differentials.

Feminist responses to manspreading

Feminist activism around manspreading comports with two broader trends in contemporary western feminism: (1) a focus on what has been called ‘everyday’ sexism; and (2) a reliance on various aspects of the cybersphere as providing the context as well as the aesthetic and strategic inspiration for activism. The feminist anti-manspreading campaigns align with other activism targeting the sorts of casual sexism experienced by large numbers of women daily – as distinct from flagrant examples of gendered oppression such as domestic violence and rape. The argument is that while a single incident of ‘micro’ sexism can easily be dismissed as trivial, many of these single incidents combined can constitute a significant social problem. Thus one man spreading over several seats on a train while other passengers stand may not, in isolation, constitute more than a minor irritant or inconvenience. Yet if this is multiplied by many men on many occasions and in many contexts, a pattern emerges and a single instance of manspreading can become a powerful symbol of ‘toxic masculinity’ (Utt, 2015). The second feature of anti-manspreading feminist activism I will now highlight concerns the way it plays out in the cybersphere, particularly with regard to: naming and shaming digilantism, citizen surveillance, crowd-sourced data, participatory memes, edgy humour, and mainstream media amplification.

As with many internet phenomena, it is difficult to pinpoint the precise moment the term ‘manspreading’ was coined or passed into popular usage. In 2012, Madeleine Davies wrote a piece for *Jezebel* entitled ‘Fuck You, Dudes Who Sit With Their Legs Spread So Wide That They Take Up Two Seats (Your Dick Is Not That Big)’. Davies (2012) does not specifically use the term ‘manspreading’ but does complain about men on trains who ‘sit down like it’s their goddamn living room’ and who spread their legs ‘in a V so dramatic that it wouldn’t be out of place in a gynecologist’s office’. A key originary moment of the spreading of the manspreading meme was the establishment, on 8 May 2013, of the Tumblr blog *Men Taking Up Too Much Space on the Train* (Manspreading, n.d.). This features multiple crowd-sourced photographs of male commuters with their legs akimbo. While the male subjects in this blog are not literally named, the fact that most are identifiable means this form of activism does constitute a form of ‘naming and shaming’ digilantism.

Feminist activism around manspreading has also involved offline vigilantism. The US writer Cassie J Sneider (2015), for instance, describes the moment she ‘snapped’ and decided to kick or sit on manspreaders who ignored her when she said ‘excuse me’. Feminist activists have also confronted manspreaders on camera and offered them tape measures to determine the precise knee distance they supposedly require (Evans, 2014). Others have experimented with sitting like men on public transport, including engaging in knee and leg pressure battles with manspreaders who try to encroach into their space (Moss, 2014). The covert photography of manspreaders also has vigilante aspects in that

it involves a type of extrajudicial citizen surveillance. These offline enterprises are, however, inextricably integrated with online vigilantism given that the results are circulated primarily via social media platforms and blogs.

Like vigilantism, digilantism can be ethically justified in some contexts. Paul H Robinson's argument is that while vigilantism cannot, by definition, be *legally* justified, it can be *morally* justified in cases where society fails to 'hold up its end of the social contract' (2015: 401, 405). Persuasive defences have also been made for feminist vigilantism, given the systemic and oppressive gender inequity faced by women across many territories and jurisdictions (see Sen, 2012; White and Rastogi, 2014). Digilantism does, however, have risks as well as benefits. Ethical issues arise given the potential for digilantism to involve bad actors, lynch mobs, scapegoating, mistaken identities, and the infliction of punishment that is disproportionate to or greater than the original crime (Jane, 2016, 2017). Naming and shaming is potentially ethically problematic because of the risk of the sorts of aggressive, metastasising cyber mobs identified by Jon Ronson (2015) and Danielle Keats Citron (2014).

Digilantism can also have uncertain results in that it may alienate, divide, or be invisible to the broader public and the powers-that-be, resulting in activism that is not conducive to the sought-after social and/or institutional changes. Conversely, the actions of digilantes may be so impressive that outsiders form the view that no other interventions are required. For example, the media applause frequently given to feminist digilantes may fortify extrajudicial cultures online in cases where institutional remedies would arguably be more useful (Jane, 2016, 2017). Like other forms of vigilantism, the offline vigilantism around manspreading may put activists in danger. For instance, anti-manspreading feminists who engage in embodied activism on public transport could potentially suffer injury if any of the men they confront or photograph respond with force. (This is not to argue that activism involving physical danger should always be avoided; it is simply an acknowledgement of the potential risk.)

When appraising the efficacy and ethics of the anti-manspreading campaigns, it is useful to consider feminists' use of the edgy, participatory humour that has become so popular in digital cultures. 'Manspreading' is one of a number of wry feminist portmanteaus used to draw attention – primarily via the cybersphere – to sexist practices involving what is perceived to be men's inflated sense of entitlement. Similar terms include 'mansplaining',² 'manslamming',³ 'maninterrupting',⁴ and 'bropropriating'.⁵ The playfulness – but also the pointed nature – of these neologisms chimes with a number of more general characteristics of the way humour works online. While making broad generalisations about internet humour obviously risks homogenising a richly heterogeneous genre, it has been observed that humour online often involves absurdity, profanity, word play, sarcasm, jokes at others' expenses, in-group gags, pranks, competitiveness, playfulness, irony, transgression, re-mixes, virality, and so on (see Phillips, 2015; Stryker, 2011).

The origins of internet humour with the aforementioned characteristics can be tracked back to subcultural trolling communities such as those active on websites such as 4chan (Phillips, 2015; Stryker, 2011). The humour involved in feminist anti-manspreading activism, however, varies markedly from the hunt for 'lulz'⁶ associated with trolls.⁷ Anti-manspreading humour, for example, is putatively underpinned by social justice concerns, whereas a signal characteristic of online humour in male-dominated subcultural trolling

communities includes a vehement rejection of what are dismissed as ‘social justice warriors’ (SJWs). That trolls’ avowed enemies – feminist SJWs – are appropriating elements of troll humour to use back against men is ironic, and constitutes a meta dimension of the activism. That said, humour involving the ridicule or abuse of identifiable individuals raises ethical issues if it involves the sort of ‘gleeful savagery’ Ronson (2015) has observed vis-à-vis the punishment of transgressors via online public shaming. These processes of appropriation and re-appropriation are also endless and can just as easily turn against feminists. For example, a search of ‘#manspreading’ on Twitter includes photographic *celebrations* as well as *criticisms* of the practice.

It can be seen, therefore, that the use of humour in the anti-manspreading campaign is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the catchy portmanteau and wry feminist commentary helps explain the viral popularity of manspreading content. On the other hand, the participatory meme culture that has become a hallmark of contemporary digital cultures (Phillips, 2015: 137) means that manspreading hashtags and image galleries are continually being subverted – sometimes simply in pursuit of further humour. Know Your Meme’s tracking of the spread of the manspreading meme points to the Tumblr blogs One Bro, Two Seats and also Saving Room for Cats, both of which feature photographs of manspreaders with absurd images digitally inserted into the gaps between their legs. This drift away from feminism and towards whimsy is also obvious in the ‘catspreading’ meme which features felines in variously splayed poses.

Feminist activism around manspreading can be deemed as having achieved success at the awareness-raising level. The term, the phenomenon, and the feminist digilante responses continue to generate a great deal of international mainstream and social media coverage ranging from extremely positive to extremely negative. The valence of this coverage is perhaps not as important as its role in assisting feminist efforts to propel awareness of the term and the practice of manspreading into mainstream consciousness. In 2015, for instance, the word ‘manspreading’ was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In the same year, New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) launched a commuter civility campaign which included a series of posters reading, ‘Dude ... Stop the Spread, Please. It’s a space issue.’ These featured a stylised image of a man sitting with his legs splayed over several seats while other commuters stood. Institutions in other US cities – as well as the Toronto Transit Authority – also began encouraging male passengers to sit with their legs closed (Uffalussy, 2014).

Counter-responses from men’s rights activists

Men’s rights activists⁸ have protested bitterly about the feminist anti-manspreading campaign from its earliest days, with the MTA campaign spurring some of the most hostile and vitriolic discourse. While feminist claims about both the practice of and the power signifiers involved in manspreading find support in a range of scholarly literature, most of the men’s rights activist counter-claims have dubious truth value. The most prominent counter-argument is that men need to sit widely in order to ensure their genital safety and comfort. This claim is entirely unsupported by the medical literature. Michael Eisenberg, an assistant professor of urology at the Stanford School of Medicine, for instance, told journalists that – barring recent scrotile or penile surgery – there is no medical reason for

men to sit with their legs spread out at any time (cited in Uffalussy, 2014). This, however, did not dissuade a Canadian men's rights group from sponsoring a change.org petition arguing that forcing men to sit with their legs together could indeed cause them physical pain: 'We can't force woman [sic] to stop breast feeding on busses or trains and we can't force men or women to stop bringing strollers on, why should we force men to close their legs?' (Don't allow the ban on 'man spreading' on the bus/train to pass, 2014).

Men's rights activists have also taken issue with the gendered nature of the term 'manspreading' and contended that self-centred and anti-social behaviour on transport is an issue of individual etiquette rather than gender. To support this claim, they have posted photos of women taking up more than a single seat due to the positioning of their bodies or their bags. Criticism has also been directed at feminists for taking non-consensual photos which allegedly place an emphasis on men's crotches. These, it is claimed, are on par with 'creepshots'⁹ and 'revenge porn'.¹⁰ One male commentator posted a sexualised image of a woman with her legs apart in a pornographic media text accompanied by the statement that 'manspreading' was more applicable to women because they have been doing this 'for Fun and Profit [sic] ... for eons' (J, 2015).

While it is true that women who take up additional seats on crowded transport with hand luggage can be accused of using public space in a selfish manner if other commuters are standing, the suggestion that women with large breasts or body sizes are guilty of a female version of manspreading is absurd. A large bodied or amply breasted woman cannot – via an act of will – reduce her body mass in order to offer others more room on a crowded train, whereas a man with his legs spread very widely can choose to close them. The suggestion that commuters who take up space with prams are also engaged in a type of manspreading is equally unconvincing, not least because these transportation devices contain another human or humans who also have the right to safely occupy a degree of public space.

We can see, therefore, that many lines of the men's rights argument rely on false equivalence. The claim that the leg positions of women engaged in sex acts in pornography and men sitting on trains are somehow the same in terms of their impact on shared public space, for instance, is patently ridiculous. These are not analogous examples and it is difficult to see how a compelling case could be made for them being analogous. As with the 'false balance' observed in media coverage of climate change issues (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007), however, the men's rights case is presented by some media outlets in such a way as to suggest it represents the reasonable 'other side' to the feminist case (cf. May, 2015; Yuen, 2014).

A substantial sector of men's rights discourse around manspreading cites feminist activism in this area as evidence of problems with feminism as a whole. Campaigns against manspreading, it is argued, are positive proof that contemporary feminists are humourless, hypersensitive, hypocritical, ludicrous, man-hating, and socially 'retard[ed]' (Forney, 2015). The focus on men's sitting styles is dismissed as a desperate bid for relevance given that the movement has 'nothing left to fight for and no arguments left to win' (Yiannopoulos, 2014). The blogger Clayton Craddock sees the campaign as 'part of a recent surge in a noxious form of feminism – or pseudo feminism – preoccupied with male misbehavior, no matter how trivial' (2015). This type of feminism, he claims, is paranoid and inequitable, while the term 'manspreading' has 'nasty and somewhat

obscene overtones' and constitutes a gender-based slur (2015). Another blogger argues that the SJW battle against manspreading shows feminism is not only dead but in a state of rancid decomposition:

About three days after death, corpses really start to stink. After rigor and livor mortis, the body's cells start to rupture – what's commonly known as putrefaction. This horrific interstitial stage of decomposition is where the unhappy modern feminist movement currently finds itself: emitting noxious odours, but well on the way to decay and skeletonisation, long past the point where CPR would have any effect on the brain. For feminism, skeletonisation cannot come soon enough. (Yiannopoulos, 2014).

The tenor of this discourse is revealing. If we take Davies' 'Fuck You, Dudes' piece as the approximate beginning of the manspreading debate, it can be seen that, from the outset, the tone of some key feminist players was combative, profane, and emotive. The response from men's rights activists, meanwhile, was similarly pitched and involved comparable strategic moves in terms of the deployment of naming and shaming digilantism, *ad hominem*s, sarcasm, narky humour, and so on. Such mimetic 'doubling' is theorised by René Girard, who argues that antagonism is both predicated on and generative of a type of mirroring where combatants increasingly come to resemble each other (1986: 42–7). This type of escalating mimetic antagonism is common in online disputes, where often the point does not seem to be about winning an argument via engaging with others' propositions, so much as increasing discursive volume in order to out-shout everyone else (Jane, 2014).

As such, a number of interesting problematics arise in relation to the manspreading case study, as well as in relation to conflictual cyber discourse more generally. For instance: What is the significance of online debate in which interlocutors are emotional (rather than detached and deliberative), abusive (instead of calmly civil), and seemingly less interested in deploying coherent reasoning so much as 'winning' at all costs? Does escalating, mimetic antagonism result in the hardening of opposing views instead of (or at least alongside of) a productive outcome? Or is the exchange *itself* the only outcome required? And what insights, if any, are available here for feminist activists? In the next section of this article, I will show that agonistic theory's emphasis on affect, power, ineradicable conflict, and shifting hegemonies seems to offer a fruitful theoretical framework for beginning to answer these questions, but that there are limits to its usefulness.

Agonistic theory and the internet

'Agonistic pluralism' is Mouffe's term for a form of radical democracy which recognises that conflict and confrontation are not only a productive and permanent part of political conflict, but are necessary conditions for politics to exist at all. While Mouffe herself has expressed some ambivalence about the agonistic possibilities of new media platforms (cited in Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006), a number of thinkers have used her work to argue that online scenes of exclusion, dispute, vitriol, and 'hating' are exemplars of the types of passionate public spaces Mouffe sees as constituting deep democracy (see McCosker, 2014; McCosker and Johns, 2013; Neumayer and Svensson, 2014; Shaw, 2012; Tong, 2015).

Mouffe's ideas, along with those from agonistic theory more generally (see Connolly, 1993, 1995; Honig, 1993), do provide some useful insights when applied to the manspreading debate. That both sides can be framed as engaging in a struggle to have their own views achieve the status of 'common sense' comports with the centrality of hegemonic struggle in agonistic purviews of the political (Mouffe, 2013a: xvii, 2005b: 9). Further, while the digilantism involved in the manspreading debate could represent the sort of 'exodus' from political institutions Mouffe warns against, the campaign's success in terms of increasing mainstream awareness and achieving a degree of institutional support resonates with Mouffe's case that activists should not withdraw from but engage with existing institutions and hegemonies in order to transform them (2013b).

Thus far, the manspreading debate seems to comport with the agonistic idea that even quite vicious conflict can play out in a democratically engaged manner. Complications arise, however, when we attempt to discern whether the combatants and conflict involved are the productive kinds Mouffe endorses, or whether they instead involve destructive domination and violence. Mouffe draws a distinction between the mode of conflict she sees as useful for democracy (agonism) and that which is not (antagonism). Agonism involves opponents who are adversaries and who may fight each other with 'radical negativity' (Mouffe, 2013a: xii), but who respect the legitimacy of each other's right to prosecute their cases. Antagonism, in contrast, is a struggle between enemies who seek each other's destruction (Mouffe, 2013a: 7). While this division makes sense as an abstract concept and theoretical solution, attempts to apply it to the manspreading conflict reveal some constraints to its normative usefulness.

Given that the adversaries/enemy distinction is so key to determining whether a conflict is productively agonistic or destructively antagonistic, we would hope to find clear guidance on how to distinguish the two. Mouffe's direction is that adversaries are oppositional yet respectful of each other's right to disagree, as well as possessing 'a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy' (1999: 755). William E Connolly textures this by advocating the cultivation of 'agonistic respect' among rivals (1993: ix, 1995: 234).

Such proposals are admirable in their endeavours to recognise the ineluctability of conflict while also proposing that there are means to express this in not just an innocuous but a politically productive way. Logistical and epistemic difficulties arise, however, when we consider how best we might: (1) detect the presence of interior states such as respect in combatants; and (2) cultivate these states if they are found to be lacking. In the manspreading case study, for instance, a close examination of the discourse produced by feminists and men's rights activists does not offer a clear answer to the question of whether there exists mutual agonistic respect of the type demanded by Connolly and mostly endorsed by Mouffe (2013a: 13).

The discourse of some interlocutors certainly *seems* more respectful than others. Yet this may not correlate with its authors' interior states. Further, these interior states will never be accessible to analysts in an unmediated form. Questions could be asked, and guesswork conducted based on the actions of collective subjects and the subsequent socio-political outcomes of these actions. But such approaches seem unreliable and lacking in rigour given the importance of what is being determined: that is, the necessary conditions required to separate the agonistic from the antagonistic.

Further, it might be asked who is deemed to have the authority to adjudicate on such matters. If the answer is, 'the political theorist', surely this risks placing the analyst in a God-like position in precisely the manner Mouffe disallows? While Mouffe rejects the idea of impartial outside observers (2013a: 81), she does seem to be positioning herself and her views as outside the field of analysis, and to be offering a normative political model supposedly suited – at least at the theoretical level – to all of humanity in all contexts. Indeed, issues arise as to the feasibility of determining whether one's *own* internal state is agonistic rather than antagonistic. My intentions might be staunchly agonistic, but this does not guarantee that my assessment is correct or that my agonistic intentions automatically result in agonistic action.

Questioned directly on how a citizen with pluralist values would behave 'on a practical, everyday level', Mouffe's answer is that, a 'postmodern citizen' would be tolerant of differences and would 'make room for recognition of plurality, while recognizing that this plurality has limits, that there are points at which we are not going to accept some demands' (1996: 140–1). Again, this is not an account of actions so much as a description of interior states. A degree of circular logic is also at play in that agonism is required for 'more democratic, more egalitarian institutions' (Mouffe, 2013a: xiv), and we'll know we *have* more democratic, more egalitarian institutions when agonism can be detected. For Monique Deveaux, strong claims about the advantages of an agonistic model of democracy will remain 'ineffectual ... rhetoric' in the absence of clearer ideas about how agonistic institutions can help to inculcate and sustain agonistic respect (1999: 14). While formulating these clearer ideas seems especially important given that agonistic theories are normative rather than explanatory, it is difficult to imagine how this aim can be achieved without deploying the sorts of substantive normative claims to which Mouffe is averse.

Mouffe staunchly rejects universalism and rationalism, yet still seems to be advocating formal principles by which it can be decided whether a conflict is respectful/constructive agonism or disrespectful/destructive antagonism. It is difficult to imagine, however, such an approach working unless we know what kind of conclusions we are prepared to endorse given a shared conception of what, for example, deep democracy looks like. While offering concrete examples of agonism in action might be one way forward, these examples will be examples of what we want to highlight only because we presuppose that there is something further we can point to that arbitrates whether a given way of interacting is an example of agonism or antagonism. There seem to be two horns of a dilemma here: Don't provide guidance, and produce a theory that cannot be put to use. Provide guidance, and produce a theory that becomes steeped in precisely the sorts of substantive normative claims that we wish to adjudicate over, or, put another way, we end up begging the question in favour of one side over the other. Ultimately, therefore, attempting to use agonistic theory to explicate political debates such as the one around manspreading leaves us with further questions rather than answers.

Conclusion

This article examined a phenomenon (manspreading), activist responses to this phenomenon (feminist digilantism), and counter-responses to the activism (men's rights discourse).

It then investigated whether an agonist conceptual lens could be used to view this conflict in a positive light – that is, as a healthy and constructive disagreement. Agonism, however, was found to have limited usefulness in this regard. Agonism's inability to re-frame this conflict in a positive way leaves some interesting questions about what to make of – and how feminist and other activists might best manage – the escalating and mimetic vitriol associated with political debates in the cybersphere. I will now re-cap the details sketched above in order to offer some possible answers to these questions.

Feminist anti-manspreading campaigns exemplify two significant characteristics of contemporary feminist activism: first, an emphasis on 'everyday', 'casual' or 'micro' sexism; and, second, a reliance on the cybersphere as both a *location* as well as an *aesthetic and strategic inspiration* for activism. Feminist activism around manspreading can be deemed a success in terms of raising mainstream awareness, and securing a degree of institutional support. That said, participatory aspects of the web work both for and against activists, and the digilante strategies deployed carry many potential risks.

Particular attention was paid to the counter-response by men's rights activists in terms of the way feminist and men's rights groups sometimes mirrored each other's vitriolic rhetoric and digilante strategies in a manner which seemed to escalate rather than 'resolve' the conflict. Furthermore, agonistic theoretical approaches were shown to be of only limited assistance in making sense of this conflict as a healthy and constructive argument because of the difficulties involved in determining whether the combatants were adversaries or enemies. As such, it was not possible to pass a definitive judgement on whether the manspreading debate was or was not agonistic.

Further, it was argued that the problems arising in relation to the adversary/enemy distinction merit further scrutiny more generally. This is especially true with regard to conflict online, where there is a relative surfeit of what Mouffe terms 'the political' (the dimension of antagonism she takes to be constitutive of human societies [2005b: 9]), and a relative deficit of 'politics' ('the ensemble of practices and institutions whose aim is to organize human coexistence' [Mouffe, 2013a: xii]). A broader critique of agonistic theory was furnished based on the difficulties identified in operationalising the theory. It was asked how we might know if a conflict was an instance of agonism rather than antagonism without the provision of concrete examples. This, in turn, raised the problem that examples might be thought to presuppose the very substantive normative claims which Mouffe wants to exclude from counting as premises in debates because doing so re-introduces substantive conclusions as premises into the arguments for those conclusions (that is, it begs the question and is circular).

Mouffe's (persuasive) assertion is that conflict is ineradicable. Yet the discourse around manspreading is a reminder that not all cases prosecuted in a conflict are created equal. While not every feminist claim about manspreading should be taken as gospel, feminists do cite some evidence that would conceivably be recognised *as evidence* by non-feminists. The propositional content of the men's rights counter-response is, in contrast, far weaker. Anecdotal allegations about the need to manspread because of genital comfort and safety are entirely unsupported by medical literature, while many other aspects of the men's rights argument rely on false equivalence. Despite the many weaknesses in their counterclaims, however, there is a risk that the

men's rights position is presented and read as the balanced other side to the case offered by feminists.

While there is no easy solution to the problem of false balance, the manspreading case study does offer some insights for feminists wishing to maximise activist efforts in online domains. Naming and shaming may be enjoyable for participants and amusing for outsiders. Yet if an activist's goal is primarily political, it is worth considering the extent to which the tactics deployed are: (a) ethical; and (b) likely to obtain the desired results. With regards to the anti-manspreading campaign, my argument is that posting identifiable, context-less photographs of alleged manspreaders *is* ethically questionable. The shock value of the digilante photo galleries served an awareness-raising role, and presumably offered female contributors an empowering sense of agency. That said, activists could have achieved similar ends by posting photographs of manspreaders in a way which did not identify the individuals involved. Supplying context for photos would have also been valuable, in that manspreading in an empty train carriage arguably has a different social impact to manspreading in a crowded train carriage in which other commuters are standing.

Those unpersuaded by an Aristotelian-informed case that acting ethically is virtuous in and of itself might wish to consider the ethics of activist engagement from a more utilitarian perspective. Returning to the manspreading case study, we can see that the naming and shaming tactic was seized on by detractors and arguably pulled focus from the central points being made about male privilege, non-verbal displays of dominance, casual sexism, and so on. Adopting an ethically defensible activist strategy might not convince hardened detractors, but it would, potentially, close one possible line of attack. This is important not because it increases the 'winnability' of the argument (here my conclusions align with agonistic theorists in that I do not think such debates are likely to ever reach a moment of final resolution). Rather, it might assist in reducing the 'false balance' effect in that it removes one of the few potentially valid objections contained in the men's rights counter-responses.

Rigorously interrogating and critiquing these counter-responses would also be a useful component of feminist activism going forward. This would require a rejection of agonism's aversion to rhetorics of reason and rationality, and an embrace of, for example, the sorts of pragmatist approaches offered by Richard Rorty (1989). Feminist ironists would then be in a position to critique the coherence of the counter-responses of men's rights activists without claiming to be in possession of the sorts of universal reason or final objectivity that agonistic theorists – quite rightly – reject.

In addition to approaching digilantism with a great deal of caution, feminists ought to think carefully about whether or not to prosecute their cases via vitriol, *ad hominem*s, and so on. Again, those activists unconcerned by an appeal to ethics (in the schoolyard sense of two wrongs not making a right), might wish to consider the strategic disadvantages of participating in and facilitating scenes of ongoing and escalating antagonism. Arguments such as those around manspreading are indeed likely to be endless and unwinnable. But stepping back from tit-for-tat name-calling might help steer debates in directions that are more advantageous to feminist activists (such as securing institutional support in forms such as the MTA's public awareness campaign). The most reliable outcome of joining shouting matches, in contrast, is usually more shouting.

Funding

This work was supported by the Australian Research Council under Discovery Early Career Research Award Grant DE150100670.

Notes

1. The search terms used during the data collection phase of the manspreading study were ‘manspread’, ‘manspreading’, ‘manspreader’, ‘digilantism’, ‘online vigilantism’, and ‘internet vigilantism’.
2. ‘Mansplaining’ refers to men who offer women patronising explanations of topics of which they are likely to have prior and/or expert knowledge.
3. ‘Manslamming’ refers to male pedestrians who collide with people who get in their way.
4. ‘Maninterrupting’ refers to the unnecessary and patronising interruption of a woman by a man.
5. ‘Bropriating’ refers to a man thieving and taking credit for a woman’s ideas.
6. ‘Lulz’, a corruption of ‘Laugh Out Loud’ (LOL), is ‘a cornerstone of trolling humor and culture’ and involves unapologetic schadenfreude (Phillips, 2015: 27).
7. Here I am using the term ‘troll’ to refer to members of the types of subcultural trolling communities researched by Whitney Phillips (2015).
8. My use of the term ‘feminists’ and ‘men’s rights activists’ in this article is not to suggest a neat split between women on one side and men on the other, as there are male commentators who have spoken in support of anti-manspreading activism and female commentators who have spoken against it.
9. ‘Creepshots’ is a slang term used to describe non-consensual, sexualised photos usually taken by men of women.
10. ‘Revenge porn’ refers to the uploading of sexually explicit material – usually of a former female partner – without the consent of the pictured subject.

References

- Alfred C (2014) In Turkey, women shame male passengers with ‘close your legs’ Twitter Campaign. *Huffington Post*, 26 April. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2014/04/25/turkey-close-your-legs_n_5208432.html?ir=Australia (accessed 15 January 2016).
- Boykoff J and Boykoff M (2007) Journalistic balance as global warming bias. *Global Envision*, 9 February. Available at: <http://www.globalenvision.org/library/1/1458> (accessed 6 November 2015).
- Brügger N (ed.) (2010) *Web History*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Burgoon JK and Dunbar N (2006) Nonverbal expressions of dominance and power in human relationships. In: Manusov V and Patterson ML (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Nonverbal Communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 279–298.
- Carpentier N and Cammaerts B (2006) Hegemony, democracy, agonism and journalism: an interview with Chantal Mouffe. *Journalism Studies* 7(6): 964–975.
- Carney DR, Cuddy AJC and Yap AJ (2010) Power posing: brief nonverbal displays affect neuroendocrine levels and risk tolerance. *Psychological Science* 21(10): 1363–1368.
- Citron DK (2014) *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Connolly WE (1993 [1974]) *The Terms of Political Discourse*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Connolly WE (1995) *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Craddock C (2015) #Manspreading. *The SoCraddock Method*, 15 January. Available at: <http://www.socraddockmethod.com/manspreading/> (accessed 28 October 2015).

- Davies M (2012) Fuck you, dudes who sit with their legs spread so wide that they take up two seats (your dick is not that big). *Jezebel*, 12 December. Available at: http://jezebel.com/5967972/fuck-you-dudes-who-sit-with-their-legs-spread-so-wide-that-they-take-up-two-seats-your-dick-is-not-that-big?utm_expid=66866090-57.ogTKxhToQfiBdvYxi2nmXQ.0 (accessed 22 October 2015).
- Davis M and Weitz S (1981) Sex differences in body movements and positions. In: Mayo C and Henley NM (eds) *Gender and Nonverbal Behavior*. New York: Springer-Verlag, pp. 81–94.
- Deveaux M (1999) Agonism and pluralism. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 25(4): 1–22.
- Don't allow the ban on 'man spreading' on the bus/train to pass (2014) Available at: <https://www.change.org/p/toronto-transit-comission-don-t-allow-the-ban-on-man-spreading-on-the-bus-train-to-pass> (accessed 23 November 2015).
- Evans L (2014) Manspreading. *dailymotion*, 18 December. Available at: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2cth6s_manspreading_news (accessed 28 October 2015).
- Forney M (2015) 'Manspreading' shows the social retardation of young women. *Return of Kings*, 26 January. Available at: <http://www.returnofkings.com/53991/manspreading-shows-the-social-retardation-of-young-women> (accessed 27 October 2015).
- Foucault M (1977) Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In: Bouchard DF (ed.) *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 139–164.
- Garvey EG (1995) Reframing the bicycle: advertising-supported magazines and scorching women. *American Quarterly* 47(1): 66–101.
- Girard R (1986) *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Gregory P. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Harding S (ed.) (2004) *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*. New York: Routledge.
- Honig B (1993) *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Huang L, Galinsky AD, Gruenfeld DH and Guillory LE (2011) Powerful postures versus powerful roles: which is the proximate correlate of thought and behavior? *Psychological Science* 22(1): 95–102.
- J C (2015) 'Manspreading' is more applicable to women than men. *WMASAW: What Men Are Saying About Women*, 4 July. Available at: <http://whatmenthinkofwomen.blogspot.com.au/2015/07/manspreading-is-more-applicable-to.html> (accessed 27 October 2015).
- Jane EA (2014) 'Your a ugly, whorish, Slut' – understanding e-bile. *Feminist Media Studies* 14(4): 531–546.
- Jane EA (2016) Online misogyny and feminist digilantism. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 30(3): 284–297.
- Jane EA (2017) Feminist digilante responses to a slut-shaming on Facebook. *Social Media + Society* 30(2): 1–10.
- Koopman C (2013) *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Macleod BA (1993) 'Whence comes the lady timpanist?' Gender and instrumental musicians in America, 1853–1990. *Journal of Social History* 27(2): 291–309.
- Manspreading (n.d.) Available at: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/manspreading> (accessed 22 October 2015).
- May G (2015) Is the 'manspreading' campaign just prejudice against big guys? *The Telegraph*, 30 January. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/11374213/Is-the-manspreading-campaign-just-prejudice-against-big-guys.html> (accessed 15 January 2016).

- McCosker A and Johns A (2013) Productive provocations: vitriolic media, spaces of protest and agonistic outrage in the 2011 England riots. *The Fibreculture Journal* 22.
- McCosker A (2014) Trolling as provocation: YouTube's agonistic publics. *Convergence* 20(2): 201–217.
- Moss G (2014) Why do guys spread their legs when sitting on the subway? My weekend of sitting like a man. *Bustle*, 7 August. Available at: <http://www.bustle.com/articles/34279-why-do-guys-spread-their-legs-when-sitting-on-the-subway-my-weekend-of-sitting-like> (accessed 28 October 2015).
- Mouffe C (1996) On the itineraries of democracy: an interview with Chantal Mouffe. *Studies in Political Economy* 49(spring): 131–148.
- Mouffe C (1999) Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism? *Social Research* 66(3): 745–758.
- Mouffe C (2005a) *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso.
- Mouffe C (2005b) *On the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Mouffe C (2009) *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.
- Mouffe C (2013a) *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. London: Verso.
- Mouffe C (2013b) 'A vibrant democracy needs agonistic confrontation': an interview with Chantal Mouffe. *Citizenship in Southeast Europe*, 22 July. Available at: <http://www.citsee.eu/interview/vibrant-democracy-needs-agonistic-confrontation-interview-chantal-mouffe> (accessed 6 November 2015).
- Neumayer C and Svensson J (2014) Activism and radical politics in the digital age: towards a typology. *Convergence*, 16 October: 1–16.
- O'Reilly C (2014) Sidesaddles and suffragettes – the fight to ride and vote. 6 October. Available at: <http://horsetalk.co.nz/2014/10/06/sidesaddles-suffragettes-fight-ride-vote/#axzz3pKpkVqli> (accessed 23 October 2015).
- Peper E and Lin I-M (2012) Increase or decrease depression: how body postures influence your energy level. *Biofeedback* 40(3): 125–130.
- Phillips W (2015) *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Post E (1922) *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co. Available online via Project Gutenberg at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14314/14314-h/14314-h.htm> (accessed 23 October 2015).
- Robinson PH (2015) The moral vigilante and her cousins in the shadows. *Faculty Scholarship*, paper 506. Available at: http://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship/506 (accessed 18 November 2015)
- Romano A (2015) Proof that manspreading has been a problem since the beginning of time. *Mashable*, 7 August. Available at: http://mashable.com/2015/08/06/manspreading-in-paintings/#V9a1TtKO_aqk (accessed 22 October 2015).
- Ronson J (2015) *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Rorty R (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sen A (2012) Case study: women's vigilantism in India: a case study of the Pink Sari Gang. *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*, December. Available at: <http://www.massviolence.org/women-s-vigilantism-in-india-a-case-study-of-the-pink-sari> (accessed 18 November 2015).
- Shaw F (2012) The politics of blogs: theories of discursive activism online. *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture & Policy* 142: 41–49.
- Sneider CJ (2015) I have been sitting on manspreaders for the last month and i have never felt more free. *xojane*, 4 June. Available at: <http://www.xojane.com/issues/sitting-on-manspreaders> (accessed 28 October 2015).
- Stryker C (2011) *Epic Win for Anonymous: How 4Chan's Army Conquered the Web*. New York: Overlook Duckworth.

- Tong J (2015) The formation of an agonistic public sphere: emotions, the internet and news media in China. *China Information*, 15 September.
- Uffalussy JG (2014) Is 'manspreading' a medical necessity? *Yahoo! Health*, 31 December. Available at: <https://www.yahoo.com/health/is-manspreading-a-medical-necessity-106551544862.html> (accessed 23 November 2015).
- Utt J (2015) From manspreading to mansplaining – 6 ways men dominate the spaces around them. *Everyday Feminism*, 1 September. Available at: <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/09/6-ways-men-dominate-space/> (accessed 22 October 2015).
- Vrugt A and Luyterink M (2000) The contribution of bodily posture to gender stereotypical impressions. *Social Behavior and Personality* 28(1): 91–103.
- White A and Rastogi S (2014) Justice by any means necessary: vigilantism among Indian women. In: Ponzanesi S (ed.) *Gender, Globalization, and Violence: Postcolonial Conflict Zones*. New York: Routledge, pp. 214–228.
- Yiannopoulos M (2014) What is 'manspreading' and why are people angry about it? *Breitbart*, 22 December. Available at: <http://www.breitbart.com/london/2014/12/22/what-is-manspreading-and-why-are-people-angry-about-it/> (accessed 20 October 2015).
- Yuen J (2014) Anti-'manspreading' campaign called sexist. *Toronto Sun*, 29 December. Available at: <http://www.torontosun.com/2014/12/29/anti-manspreading-campaign-called-sexist> (accessed 23 October 2015).

Author biography

Emma A Jane (previously Emma Tom) is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of New South Wales. Online misogyny, cyberbullying, and digital mobs are the current foci of her ongoing research into the social and ethical implications of emerging technologies. She is the award-winning author of eight books, most recently the fifth edition of *Cultural Studies – Theory and Practice*, co-authored with Chris Barker and published by Sage in 2016.