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# “Happy to provide the knives”: Governmentality and threats of violence via social media in the case of Roosh V and Return of Kings by Stuart Bender

## Abstract

This paper uses the online threats of violence to Roosh V and Return of Kings — blogs relating to pick-up artist culture and “neo-masculinity” — as a case study to examine the ways in which people use social media as a technology of the self. In early 2016, groups mobilized online using the Facebook platform to protest meet-ups that had been planned by Roosh V for his supporters. Some of the Facebook users responded with extreme suggestions to rape Roosh and the Return of Kings members themselves, violating them with sharp objects, as well as outright murder. In this paper I am interested in a specific question related to governmentality: what do these hateful, violent threats suggest about the way people use social media as a form of self-governance?

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## 1. Introduction: The case of Roosh V and his Return of Kings

In this paper I present a case study of how governmentality can be observed in a series of threats made via social media against a particular individual and associated supporters of his controversial beliefs about women. The subject of the threats was an online blogger and self-titled “neo-masculinist” by the name of Roosh V. His blog generally features creative writing pieces on masculinity, musings on how to meet women, as well as where he sells a series of e-book “pick-up” guides for meeting women in other countries. Much of his material is politically incorrect, and much can be easily regarded as sexist. Early in 2016, Roosh announced on another blog called “Return of Kings,” which he owns and occasionally contributes to, that there would be an international meet-up day where “readers of Return of Kings, Roosh V Forum, and my blog will have the opportunity to meet other like-minded men in their cities” (Valizadeh, 2016b). Soon, online social media and newspaper articles ran stories labeling Roosh and his supporters as “pro-rape” advocates (Lu, 2016; Moloney and Aubusson, 2016). On the surface, this is a bizarre jump from a group of men meeting to talk about “pick-up” techniques to them being supporters of rape. However, the newspaper articles were in fact referring to a blog post he had published one year earlier — entirely unrelated to the meet-ups — titled “How to stop rape,” in which he states that the solution is to “make rape legal if done on private property” (Valizadeh, 2015b).

Although Roosh had previously claimed the article was satirical, and during the reactions of February he added that the meet-ups had nothing to do with discussing rape, there were reactions on the Internet from a number of countries with people opposed to the meet-ups. This opposition appears to have been entirely based on the mistaken belief that the meet-ups were intended to promote the legalisation of rape. In Australia, a change.org petition to "Stop Supporters of 'Legal Rape' Roosh V Advocates Meeting in Sydney/Entering Australia" appeared, attracting just over 100,000 supporters (change.org, 2016). Protests were also organized online using social media platforms, and for the most part, the organizers of the civil responses appear to have used the technology for peaceful awareness and protest purposes.

But there were some significantly more extreme responses, including a Facebook event created with the title "The mutilation of 'legal rape' supporters [sic] genitalia" (2016) [1] as well as threats of raping Roosh and the Return of Kings members themselves, violating them with sharp objects, and outright murder. As I will show, these public threats of aggression provide a case study of some of the ways social media can be "used" by citizens to display their ethical beliefs in a practice of self-examination. Debates of sexual politics — and especially what is known as rape culture — are necessarily complex and controversial and this article does not analyze those aspects of the issue, nor do I explore issues of free speech and hate speech (Yong, 2011). Rather than sexual politics, I am interested here in an analysis of bio-politics (Foucault, 1979), specifically the self-governing nature of social media and its engagement with these violent threats.

Such an analysis is timely. One recent round-table analysis of "iterations of hate speech [which seem to] have become endemic to much online discourse" gestured towards the "continuities between off-line and online hate through embodied forms of violence" [2]. Research into e-bile, in particular the gendered aspects of cyber-violence, has also examined the "extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the *recreational nastiness*" often displayed on Internet platforms [3]. To address the case of aggressive threats against Roosh V and his supporters I use the perspective of governmentality, or the practice of self-government. Therefore, while there are many complex issues that arise from this particular case of violent threats on social media, this paper is driven by a specific question related to governmentality: what do these aggressive, violent threats suggest about the way people use social media as an occasion of self-governance when dealing with controversial and extreme topics?



## 2. Background: Roosh's like-minded men

Given that Roosh's post on 4 January 2016 encouraged "like-minded men" to meet and discuss their ideas together, it is worth considering what constitutes "like-minded men," according to the site owner. Return of Kings intends to:

Usher the return of the masculine man in a world where masculinity is being increasingly punished and shamed in favor of creating an androgynous and politically-correct society that allows women to assert superiority and control over men. Sadly, yesterday's masculinity is today's misogyny. The site intends to be a safe space on the web for those men who don't agree with the direction that Western culture is headed. (Return of Kings, n.d.)

This ideology manifests in a remarkably diverse range of topics, with posts ranging from relationship and dating advice, lifestyle suggestions and thoughts on contemporary women to outright conspiracy theories. For instance, between March and April 2016 the blog included posts with suggestions of locations conducive to meeting women during the day to start conversations and arrange dates, how to cook a steak, discussions taking a position against political correctness, introductory listening recommendations of classical music, kegel exercises to improve sexual performance, discussions of U.S. politics, as well as a proposal of the possibility that an assassination attempt on Donald Trump is being deliberately incited by the media's choice to "paint Trump and his supporters as violent, dangerous bigots who must be eliminated at all costs" (Sebastian, 2016). During the 11 months between February 2015 and January 2016, Return of Kings attracted between 210,000–350,000 unique visitors each month, with a striking exception in February 2016 of just over 607,000 unique visitors (according to data provided by compete.com). Something about the proposed meet-ups generated almost twice the amount of interest the Web site had gathered in its peak month during the previous year. By comparison, Roosh V's own blog attracted between approximately 69,000 to 130,000 unique visitors from February 2015 to January 2016, with a significant spike to just over 389,000 unique visitors in February 2016.

The very brief surge in interest for this fringe misogynist Web site coincides with the publication of an online *Sydney Morning Herald* piece about the meet-ups on 31 January titled: "Supporters of Anti-Woman Group Return of Kings To Meet in Sydney" (Moloney, 2016). Moloney's piece states that "supporters [of the group] believe rape should be legalized on private property and

that women are biologically determine to follow the orders of men.” She refers to a blog post made by Roosh one year earlier — unrelated to the February meet-ups — in which he argued that one way to prevent rape is to “make rape legal if done on private property” (Valizadeh, 2015b). In that piece, he proposes:

If rape becomes legal under my proposal, a girl will protect her body in the same manner that she protects her purse and smartphone. If rape becomes legal, a girl will not enter an impaired state of mind where she can’t resist being dragged off to a bedroom with a man who she is unsure of — she’ll scream, yell, or kick at his attempt while bystanders are still around. If rape becomes legal, she will never be unchaperoned with a man she doesn’t want to sleep with (Valizadeh, 2015b).

Clearly, Roosh’s proposal is simultaneously disgusting, shocking and ridiculous. At some point in 2015, presumably in response to criticism in the comments section of his site, Roosh retrospectively added a note that the piece was a satire, specifically “a satirical thought experiment. It’s [sic] conclusion is not to be taken literally”. Whether his proposal is or is not satire, with such small numbers of site visitors per month it is difficult to imagine Roosh’s proposal being taken seriously by any policy-maker. Indeed, the online comments from Moloney’s readers at the *Herald* were generally of minor disbelief, with a sense of wonder if the idea of this group meeting was even serious. It is as if people simply accepted that Roosh’s piece — including the anti-progressive attitudes towards women which are prevalent on Return Of Kings — is offensive and shocking, but almost to be expected in the highly misogynized space of the Internet (Manivannan, 2013). The newspaper commentary is perhaps also to be expected, given the critiques against misogynist remarks on the Internet undertaken by writers such as Clementine Ford (Ford, n.d.; Jones, 2015) and Jessica Valenti (2016, 2014).



### 3. Virtual threats of violence

Any analysis of Roosh’s blog and views is beyond the scope of this research. My interest is in what occurred on Facebook in 2016 after he announced the Return of Kings meet-ups. While the purpose of these meet-ups did not appear to propose any sort of discussion of rape, it is perhaps understandable that some might interpret those “like-minded men” attending the meet-ups organized by Roosh as supporters of the views expressed in his rape article [4]. Within a few days, more online articles had begun to refer to what had now become known as the “Legal Rape’ Group” (Moloney and Aubusson, 2016) which apparently “advocates making rape of women legal” (Lu, 2016) and would be meeting in Australia and other countries. At this point the reactions from online communities began to escalate, particularly in Australia, with the appearance of the change.org petition to prevent their meetings from taking place, and other (mostly online) media writers reporting on the meet-ups. Politicians from Australia, New Zealand and the U.K. discussed possibly banning Roosh from entering their countries, and protests were organized against the events. These reactions illustrate what Oliver (2001) describes as “response-ability,” a practice which Rentschler [5] suggests young feminists can use to disrupt the specific aspects of “rape culture [...] identified through particular communicative acts such as catcalls, scripts of street harassment, and rape jokes”.

However, aside from the peaceful protests and awareness-raising activities associated with such response-ability, there were some quite radical reactions. For instance, a Facebook event was created apparently to organize “The mutilation of ‘legal rape’ supporters genitalia” which featured the following descriptions:

This teams goal is to (in a humane a way as possible) dismember or mutilate the genitals of the men who support this atrocious movement (L.R. (female) in the Mutilation of “Legal Rape” Supporters Genitalia, 2016). [6]

Anyone wanting to join me in the dismemberment of any male attending this radically misogynistic meeting? Happy to provide the knives [...] If your gonna go to jail it may as well be for this (cited in Brown, 2016). [7]

Similar threats of violence to either Roosh or the Return of Kings members also appear on some of the peaceful Facebook events created to organize protests against the 6 February meet-ups. For instance, a Sydney based event attracted the following:

If they all walk out of that meeting still alive or not in handcuffs, us as Australians have seriously fucked up [...] Fuck them all up

Australia this is one time violence is welcome (M.M (male), comment in Shut Down The Sexists!, 2016).

In the Brisbane Facebook group "Operation Takedown Rape Culture," one poster's comment "who is keen to get a shit load of waterbombs with red paint in them and have some fun?" (B.S. (male).) is quickly intensified by the suggestion of another user:

We could use sodium hydroxide in the water bombs which is found in drain cleaners to throw on their skin and allow them to inhale to give them a sore throat and because it's corrosive. I also fancy the idea of using phthalates in the water bombs or in cans. This is found in dish soap and air fresheners ... this will lower their sperm count and stop their chances of reproducing (B.S. (female), comment in Operation Takedown Rape Culture, 2016).

This is followed by another user's escalation of the violent idea:

I second paint or dye. Although there's something to be said about carving "rapist" into their foreheads (M.G. (female), comment in Operation Takedown Rape Culture, 2016).

Roosh claims he also received many direct threats via e-mail messages including "im gonna rape you with a strapon you monster. Ill cut your dick and give it to my dogs," and "I swear on my life I will rape you motherfucker. And we will see how funny it is when me and my 5 buddies fuck you up real good call us gay if you want but I'm gonna fuckin rip you're asshole apart you fuck" (cited in Valizadeh, 2016a). Of course, such threats of mutilation and rape are extreme reactions and I am not suggesting they are at all normative response to the Return of Kings meet-ups or Roosh's article. Given these are such marginal and aberrant responses — extreme both statistically and in terms of content — it is important to theoretically engage with their significance. In addition, as I will show later many commenters responded to the threats by pointing out that the use of violence was unacceptable. Regardless of whether Roosh's "How to Stop Rape" piece is satire as he claims, a legitimate proposition or even a tasteless trolling attempt to create controversy for his own amusement, these threats of violence are quite astonishing both in content (the rape threats, for example) as well as that these are statements made in public with the writers' names and identities attached.



#### 4. Methodology

In order to explore this particular phenomenon of violent threats made on the otherwise peaceful protest groups using the Facebook platform, I will adopt a case study approach. I have identified three Australian protest groups — chosen because they reflect my own cultural context, as well as existing in the national context in which the link between the Return of Kings meet-ups and Roosh's legal rape article appear to have been established by Moloney's article in the *Sydney Morning Herald Online*. These groups were also easily identifiable using a Facebook search: Operation Takedown Rape Culture (Sydney) [8], Shut Down the Sexists! (Sydney), and Witches Celebrate Keeping ROK Out of Australia (Melbourne) [9].

##### *Governmentality*

In order to understand the data collection and coding strategy, first I describe the analytic framework which is drawn from both Foucauldian discourse analysis and studies of governmentality. One of the significant aspects of the phenomenon of violent threats on Facebook is that there is a sense of accountability that we might assume is associated with the public display of opinion on the platform. This is perhaps especially surprising given that, for some researchers such as De Saullés and Horner (2011), the prevalence of mobile technologies, including social media access, can be regarded as a "portable panopticon," following Foucault's appropriation of Bentham's hypothetical design for prison architecture. But as a behaviour modifier, the panopticon requires that the subject is aware of the ever present potential to be observed by the normalizing, corrective gaze. For this reason, I prefer to think of Facebook as a more broad governmental apparatus: different from, but related to, the variety of panopticon technologies that may be evident in society. For Foucault (1988), technologies and practices of the self enable citizens to perform work upon their own bodies and souls in order to manage their conduct [10]. From such a view, Web 2.0 practices such as blogging (which includes Roosh's own work), Facebook status writing and/or commenting, as well as tweets and Instagram posts form a network of technologies which enable users to constitute their selves (Bakardjieva and Gaden, 2012).

According to Dean [11], the end point of various forms of governmentality is to "seek a knowledge of the individual and his or her inner existence, and require that the individual practise a form of self-renunciation (e.g., of alcohol and drugs, of bad habits, of co-dependent behaviours, etc)". We can see this practice of self-regulation, for instance, in the tendency for

public comments on news sites which require user identification often result in “less swearing, less anger, more affect words, more positive emotion words and less negative emotion words” [12]. Another study found that making comments non-anonymous does not remove all instances of “incivility” however it does appear to significantly lower the level of “vitriol” expressed by users by comparison to comments systems which did not link the user’s identity to their contributions (Santana, 2014). Nonetheless, in their analysis of cyber-bullying Bertolotti and Magnani (2013) suggest that there is a “*what happens in Facebook stays in Facebook*” attitude held by many users, which results in them “sharing [...] information about themselves on SN [social networks], whereas they would not do it in real life” [13]. Thus from the point of view of governmentality and surveillance, the persistent perception of Facebook as an innocuous fun platform is extremely effective at enabling users to display the selves. Indeed, this intention appears to be written into Facebook’s terms and conditions:

Authentic identity is core to the Facebook experience, and we believe that it is central to the future of the web. Our terms of service require you to use your real name and we encourage you to be your true self online, enabling us and Platform developers to provide you with more personalized experiences. [14]

There is an emergent body of literature examining the surveillance and privacy implications of Facebook from a Foucauldian perspective (see, for example, Betancourt, 2014; Fuchs, 2015; Garrido, 2015; Hull, 2015; Light and McGrath, 2010). However, for my purpose here I want to examine the violent threats posed to Roosh and the Return of Kings group via social media as a practice of subject constitution. To do so, I draw upon an adjacent area of Foucauldian research into the governmental use of texts and interpretation. After all, when the Roosh hater posted “Happy to bring the knives” on Facebook they were not randomly displaying their ethical self for public scrutiny — they were performing it in response to their reading of either an online media article explicitly describing the meet-ups as a “‘legal rape’ group” (Moloney and Aubusson, 2016) or Roosh’s original rape article, or perhaps a headline labeling the meet-ups as “pro-rape” events.

Therefore the form and occasion of governmentality I am interested in here is derived from the work of Hunter (1991, 1988) in terms of how texts are used by readers. For Hunter, citizens are very specifically trained in a reading practice within the institution of schooling to use texts as a “surface” upon which to display their ethical beliefs for self-inspection. In the initial iteration of such pedagogical technology the texts were literature, but research has shown that in contemporary classrooms this could be almost any kind of text: film/documentary, magazine, or in extreme cases a bus ticket (Bender, 2008; Moon, 2007, 1993; Patterson, 1993). Even the entertainment design of talkback radio is a technology by which citizens’ ethical selves can be displayed, inspected and self-managed (Tebbutt, 2007).

#### *Content coding*

The methodology for analyzing the content on the three Facebook protest groups was as follows. All posts, comments and replies were counted, resulting in an initial corpus of 2,607 pieces of text for analysis. These messages were then read in detail to determine an appropriate coding schema, resulting in the categories of “threats and fantasies of violence” and clear “instances of governmental routine.” This categorization excluded most of the messages from the final corpus for analysis — in general, the overwhelming bulk of the user content in these protest groups dealt with organizational issues: for example where to meet, whether or not the protest would still occur, and also general declarations of support by people who may not be able to attend.

The first category includes any violent statements and desires directed at Roosh or people who who were planning to attend the meetings. There were a number of clearly aggressive comments directed at other users in the group that I have not counted as violent posts because that do not fit the category of violent *threats directed at* Roosh and/or his supporters. The second category captures overall message threads which contain examples of users discussing the appropriateness (or otherwise) of violence, discussing the ethics of the protest itself, and occasionally discussions (however superficial) of relevant social issues such as feminism. For instance, occasional users would respond to a violent threat by stating that, if the proposed violence was intended literally, they did not believe it would be an appropriate response. For example:

I know we’re angry and outraged but please remember violence doesn’t solve anything so make sure there is nil violence [...] I know you think they’re just words on here but words are powerful and the last thing we want is for the event to be associated with violence. (M.B. (female), comment in Shut Down The Sexists!, 2016).

This coding methodology resulted in 84 discrete statements of violence across all three groups, and 48 message threads in which the routine of governmentality is clearly identifiable (see [Table 1](#) below). Clearly then, this case study is an analysis of quite marginal responses.

**Table 1:** Summary of coding of posts and comments in three Facebook protest groups.

Group	Number of posts	Number of comments and replies	Threats and fantasies of violence (in posts, comments, and replies)	Governmental routine activated
<i>Witches Celebrate Keeping ROK Out (Melbourne)</i>	78	324	10	6
<i>Shutdown the Sexists (Sydney)</i>	171	950	33	14
<i>Operation Takedown Rape Culture! (Sydney)</i>	176	1,333	41	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>425</b>	<b>2,607</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>48</b>

Certainly, the most graphically violent threats (cited earlier) in this case appear to have been made in private via a comment form direct to Roosh (Valizadeh, 2016a). But it is quite surprising that the threats made in public (on Facebook events for instance) are indeed as explicit as they are, given that one of the significant components of social media commenting is that it is not anonymous. Of course, in many ways the fact that Internet users expressed vitriol is barely surprising to anybody who has spent some time online. Interestingly, in general it is quite difficult to find comments on online news articles that condone violence against Roosh or his supporters. But it is extremely easy to find them on Facebook. Even outside the Facebook-enabled groups analysed in this paper, it is possible by searching Facebook for "rooshv" and "rape" to find random postings and comments with threats such as a news post by 7 News Queensland (2016) which garnered comments including: "Bring him to Melbourne so we can cave his face in" (J.J. (male) and "I will love to smash his face in !!!" (A.R. (male)) and a related attempt to trend the hashtag "#bashhimsenseless2016" (H.S. (male)).



## 5. Discussion: Observing self-governance online

It is important to note that in Foucauldian theory these occasions and technologies of governmentality are improvised, and not part of some totalized grand design. For instance, Rose has identified how other governmental social practices work to manage and regulate the conduct of citizens, including psychology (Rose, 1999a) and organization management such as "cutting up time in order to govern productive subjects" by arranging citizens lives around "the time of work and the time of leisure, the week and the weekend, opening hours and closing time" [15]. From this view then, social media is a contingent technology that has become incorporated into the governmental project (among its other uses) of producing self-regulating citizens. It is a form of bio-politics (Foucault, 1979). Indeed, Foucault notes that "I intend this concept of 'governmentality' to cover the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other" [16]. Consider, for instance, the following exchange on the "Operation Takedown Rape Culture" Facebook event:

E.B. (male): Just a quick question, are we like pretending to be one of them [...] Or are we just rocking up and anyone who looks rapey we are gonna punch?

R.V. (female): punching probably wont help haha lets rock up and make our opinion known in a non violent manner, unite against them, and they will probably just bail and not go through with it if enough people are there. doubt they are very organised.

S.P. (male): Not go through with what exactly? If this is an actual serious movement then having their plans for the day stopped by a bunch of ppl yelling isn't going to stop these scumbags from there ideology and acting on it.

R.V.: i mean not go through with their little meeting or whatever it is if they cant gather, im not sure if physical violence will change their ideology, their minds must be pretty warped to hold the beliefs they do.

S.P.: We can't continue to be passive with all these world issues and just hope they will go away either [...] When are [we] going to stand up against this shit.

P.T (male): Well Im a gun person in an anti gun country. Should I just go around killing people over it? Should we all fight our opinions by using violent riots as a tool.

[...]

S.P.: You keep trying to suggest I'm supporting nothing but a violent way to go about this. I really don't get what you mean by that. That is a weird as fuck comparison. You have a choice whether you want a gun or not. But our women don't have a choice whether they could be raped or not.

P.T.: Well I took in everything that you said as you wanted and are going to bash the shit out of all of them. Sorry I must have misunderstood you.

S.P.: That was how I felt hours ago. As this is all panning out. I don't know anymore.

P.T.: Yeah well thats how you have been writing things I guess then. So we on the same page now, all cool haha?

This exchange constitutes a pure example of self-governance in action. Held entirely in public, the conversation moves from the initial call to violence, to a discussion of the value of violent versus non-violent protest, to self-responsibility and finally (by S.P.) a re-evaluation of their position. Throughout, the ethical personas of each contributor are held up for inspection by themselves and others. Thus this is an example of one way in which the governmental routine of self-confession can effect a "normalisation" of aberrant and discordant views within the population. This kind of discussion occurs 48 times in the Facebook groups cited here.

Some of the violent statements call to mind Kevin Costner's statement to Keith Szarabajka in *A Perfect World* (Dir. Clint Eastwood, 1993) that there is a difference between a threat and a fact: "In two seconds I'm going to break your nose. That's a threat." After punching him directly in the face, Costner declares: "And that's a fact." Thus the masculine posturing statements against Roosh and the Return of Kings are truly interesting. They can be read as examples of "brief cyber-aggression" — normally a behavior that involves private statements of aggression using e-mail messages, text messaging etc. One study found that many perpetrators of such cyber-violence reported that they "would feel ashamed if there had been a news story about them doing it." [17] In other words, there is a strong possibility that threats of punching "anyone who looks rapey" may not be legitimate statements of intent. Nonetheless, a threat of violence is still a threat of violence and harm. It should not be regarded as less offensive or innocent simply because it may not have been meant as a literal threat or that it was posted in public under their actual name.

In addition, it is worth noting that some of these comments which involved the routine of self-governance did express a desire for violence but understood the potential legal issues with inciting this. For instance the ironic comments such as "public postings calling for violence against these men can make us look a bit hypocritical [...] Don't get me wrong, I love the idea of their entire meeting being crushed by a giant dildo, but I know not to encourage any of you to do the actual crushing!" (C.A.L. (female), comment in Shut Down The Sexists!, 2016). This acknowledgement of "knowing not to encourage [violence]" is an interesting example of self-problematizing and self-monitoring (Rose, 1999a) by which civilized society has the power of "governing *through* the freedom and aspirations of subjects rather than in spite of them" [18] The commenter here is able to constitute their self as a law-abiding, non-violent person ("I know not to encourage any of you ...") while in the process of working through, confessing and measuring their desires against psychological and social norms (Rose, 1999b).



## 6. Limitations and future research

I believe it is prudent to consider the extent to which other aspects of this particular phenomenon may also make sense using alternate theoretical frameworks. For instance, certain social media attacks against Roosh may indeed be better explained by Elias' (1994) theory of the *Civilizing Process*. Developed separately to Foucault's work on the technologies of the self, Elias' interest is in the ways that citizens develop self-restraint during maturity and with respect to exemplars provided by the family, literature, media and institutions. Existing research has attempted to link Elias' civilizing process with the bio-politics of governmentality (see Smith, 1999; van Krieken, 1990). While there are some complementary overlaps — for instance both Elias and Foucault's theories hinge upon contingent developments and changes in society — they offer fundamentally different accounts of how citizens become civilized. Foucault's model is productive, whereas Elias emphasizes restraint. Perhaps, rather than the portable panopticon it is often tempting to consider FaceBook to be, the platform is in fact what Mathiesen (1997) has described as a synopticon. Mathiesen's complementary theory to Foucault's work flips the panopticon metaphor from a situation in which we are watched to one in which we also do the watching. Thus, the experience of citizens reading through the FaceBook confessions of violence against Roosh as well as the negotiations between users debating the legality and ethics involved can be read as a synoptic governmental practice. Arguably, Mathiesen's use of the synopticon provides a valuable link between Foucault and Elias.

Although I have focused on the self-governing character evident in the confessional nature of the violent threats and in the public discussions that occurred in response to these, there does exist a will to restraint evident in some of the non-violent comments on Facebook that do propose protest against Roosh. The most relevant component of Elias' theory here is the social value of shame (Crozier, 1998; Russell, 1998). For instance, although Nurka (2013) finds that male footballers accused of rape are not often *shamed* (even if they may be disgraced) for their behavior, Roosh and his male supporters were held up for public shaming by a number of social media users. For instance, one person appeared in multiple Facebook protest events with their single contribution to the discussion being a link to someone else's Facebook profile and requesting the group's help to "reveal" this person's identity publicly because they "liked" an earlier article on the Return of Kings Facebook page (A.A., comment in Witches Celebrate Keeping ROK Out of Australia, 2016).

This kind of public "outing" or "digilantism" (Jane, 2016) of course has well-known precedent in Australia with Clementine Ford's choice to send a screenshot of an abusive Facebook comment to the poster's workplace (ABC News, 2015). In that instance, the man called Ford a "slut" on her Facebook page and was subsequently fired from his job. Jane (2016) provides an example of these kinds of digilante shaming tactics in the context of online violent threats, as in the case of Alanah Pearce, a game journalist who received a range of rape threats via Facebook in 2014 and responded by using the platform to locate the mothers of four boys. Reportedly, Pearce suggested the mothers "discuss [the hateful] messages with their children" [19]. Jane is critical of the widespread acclaim for the digilante approach, particularly in the implication that the victims of cyber-hate should be responsible for dealing with perpetrators instead of the authorities [20].

In the Facebook groups set up to protest Roosh, some commenters called for protestors to photograph attendees at the meet-ups and publish their faces online, to "make it so they'll never feel safe in public again" (B.D. (male), comment in Operation Takedown Rape Culture, 2016). Tellingly, one response to this was "Before or after they're covered in blood?" (G.J.M. (male)). On Twitter, where violent threats are difficult to find in relation to Roosh and Return of Kings, someone from the diffuse hacker group Anonymous announced "Operation Glasgow Kiss" which encouraged people to identify the names, work places, home addresses (if possible), photographs and social media account profiles and publish this information to the Twitter hashtag #OpGlasgowKiss (Vengeant, 2016). It should also be pointed out that Roosh reportedly requested his supporters similarly catalogue the photographs, names and social media profiles of journalists who wrote articles that referred to the meet-ups as pro-rape gatherings (Haynes, 2016). One difference, however, is that although he requested his supporters identify the "most likely city of residence" he did specify "don't publish addresses but save them for possible future use" (Valizadeh, cited in Haynes, 2016).

Shaming also occurred within the protest groups themselves. Consider the blunt violence in the proposal from D.D. (male) in Operation Takedown Rape Culture: "How about I rape one of these cunts with a rusty shank ... . See how they like it!!" This threat received by far the most comments of any post in the three groups (100 comments), including a long string of trolling remarks that the poster was a "keyboard warrior" (J.H. (male)), and "a pathetic weak loser" (B.A.(male)) with "sick tats" (K.R.V. (male)). It is interesting that this is by far the most overtly violent and brutal threat made in any of the three groups studied, and only invoked a small amount of commentary using the governmental routine. Rather, most of the comments were simply of shock or sarcasm directed at the poster. Shaming is also a tactic used by Roosh when he published online the extremely graphic threats sent to him by private communication, for instance "Ill cut your dick and give it to my dogs" (cited in Valizadeh, 2016a).



One of the events which changed the course of the meet-up phenomenon occurred when Roosh decided to cancel them after Anonymous reportedly released Roosh's family's home address, suggesting that he lives with his mother, and featuring the tagline: "Who likes sending mail?" (Amir, 2016; Blair, 2016). This could be read in a number of ways. On one simple level, part of the message involves an element of shaming Roosh as a grown man for living in his parents' house. Also taken literally it could be read as an incitement to send hate mail to Roosh's family. But given the level of aggression in many of the threats of violence, the act of posting his (or his family's) address could be taken as irresponsibly enabling an attack. Evidently, Roosh himself read Anonymous' actions this way. He involved the police for protection, and claimed that although he does not live in this house, his parents do, and he was in fear of his family's safety (Valizadeh, 2016c). Many comments were made in the Facebook protest groups about this demonstrating Roosh's lack of masculinity. Governmentality does not necessarily account for the shaming behavior. However, there were also occasional comments about the "macho men thumping their chests around here," shaming them for potentially "steam roll[ing] the women" and "shout[ing] over us" (L.R. (female), comment in Operation Takedown Rape Culture, 2016). These comments simultaneously display a confessional practice of self-government, undertaken in the form of embracing the civilizing role of public shaming. As Probyn suggests, "shame is immensely productive politically and conceptually in advancing a project of everyday ethics" [21]. Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to consider other such overlaps between Elias, Foucault, and Mathiesen, as well as the impact of potential online shaming as a component of self-regulation in comments made by online social media users and journalists.

Although my interest is simply in the discursive form that the self-governing reflex occurred in this context, future research may also explore the degree to which context and timing is relevant to provoking the sorts of violent threats observed here. For instance, it may be that we are living in a highly rape-sensitive time period, particularly after the horrific Steubenville rape case of 2012 (Vaughan, 2013). In that specific instance, social media played a central role in not only visualizing the behavior, but also attracted the attention of Anonymous who played a role in identifying further perpetrators of the crime (Woods, 2014). In addition, two years prior to the Return of Kings incident, in 2014, another pick-up artist by the name of Julien Blanc was ultimately refused entry to Australia after protests against his own seminar events. Reportedly Julien Blanc had used a video online to promote the "seduction" techniques he was planning to teach men which would include choking women during their initial meeting (Sullivan, 2014). During the protest period violent threats were also made on Facebook, including direct threats to "fucking choke him", and to "smash the fuck out of this asshole" as well as the suggestion to "Throw him in prison so prisoners can show him a real 'good time'" (BuzzFeed Oz, 2014).

Like Roosh, Blanc eventually claimed his message was not to be taken seriously. But unlike Roosh, he did issue a direct apology claiming his video was a misguided attempt at humor (Blanc, interview in CNN, 2014) which some regarded as a disingenuous statement (Di Stefano, 2014; Molloy, 2014). Thus, perhaps the Internet community was already primed to be sensitive to pick-up artists like Roosh. Alternatively, another contingent factor in the incitement of violence against the meet-ups could be the anti-immigration sentiment in Australia during this time. Indeed, one commenter in the Facebook protest group questioned — in true governmental form — whether people were so aggressive because Roosh was of Islamic faith (C.A. (male), comment in Shut Down The Sexists!, 2016) [22]. Apparently Roosh is not a Muslim at all, in fact he seems to have quite vehemently anti-Islamic views (Valizadeh, 2015c), though his parents are from Iran. In any case, the comment attracted several conversational exchanges between users debating the point until eventually coming to the consensus that the group was absolutely about protesting against misogyny. Even more abstractly, it may also be the case that in Australia this level of aggression was observed due to the hot weather during February: while the research in the so-called "heat hypothesis" is unclear on whether the relationship between aggression and heat is causal or correlational, there certainly exists a relationship and therefore people may be predisposed to condone violence during this time (see Anderson, 2001; Baron and Bell, 1976; Berkowitz, 1993).



## 7. Conclusion

After encountering initial criticism on his rape article, Roosh did publish a piece in 2015 titled "The Accusation That I'm A Rapist Is a Malicious Lie" in which he explicitly declares the terms "rapist" and "rape advocate" do not apply to him (Valizadeh, 2015a). If his position then in the original "How To Stop Rape" article is not that he really thinks rape should be legal, but that women should take responsibility for the positions they put themselves in, then his piece simply fits within the existing victim-blaming tradition of other "anti-rape campaigns [which] have primarily targeted women with the apparent goal of providing tips on how to avoid being raped" (Skinner, 2012). Makin and Morczek [23] criticize these campaigns as promoting the message: "'Don't get raped' (as opposed to 'don't rape')" [24]. The traditional emphasis on women's responsibility as a solution to the rape problem has been critiqued from a range of positions, including for instance the culture-jamming feminists who "hijacked the Twitter site

#safetytipsforwomen [and] joked that women should either wear chain mail or three sweat suits, a ski mask and sleeping bag when going out to avoid being raped, thus pointing out the silliness of the idea that what women wear either protects or prevents them from being assaulted" [25]. Indeed, Henriette Reker, Mayor of Cologne, Germany, was challenged on social media for her "code of conduct" suggestion that women to "remain at 'an arm's length' from strangers" to prevent further sexual assaults in public following the new year's eve mass assaults in her city by up to a thousand men (Kearney, 2016). Therefore, Roosh's views are obviously controversial but hardly an original way of thinking about sexual assault.


Putting aside the "delicate" legal framework of hate speech and free speech in the Australian context [26], in some ways, it is possible to regard this entire set of events as an example of governmentality working effectively. And, one might argue, in any case most of the threats can be regarded as fantasy or macho posturing. However, that does not make them any less meaningful. Indeed, current research into e-bile shows that many forms of cyber-bullying and cyber-aggression may be "dismissed as virtual rather than 'real' and [...] therefore not taken seriously" [27]. But they can have very real effects for those on the receiving end. As Henry and Powell (2016) argue: "Whilst the assumed distance of a harasser making threats to kill or rape on social media might lessen the risk of actioning violence, for targets of such threats, the anonymity or diffused identities of online harassers means that their proximity, connection to the victim, and/or capacity to act on the threat are all unknowns [and therefore may] cause heightened fear" [28]. One of Roosh's own supporters acknowledges this, noting that the stakes in this case were quite personal and real:

The things coming out of some of these women's mouths regarding strap on rape and cutting of penises is reprehensible [...] Most [online threats] are made with no real knowledge of where a person is or is going to be. However, with the meet ups this became very real for me, they know where I will be and at what time and have threatened, violence, doxxing [to photograph me at the event, then publicly reveal my name, workplace and home address] and rape. (J.J. (male), comment in Valizadeh, 2016a)

This is a sobering reflection when read against the rather idealistic view presented by Sindorf (2013) that Internet comments should be free for all contributions — regardless of potential trolling and insults — and that online debate, even of uncomfortable topics, can be a "vehicle through which [users can] make substantive political points" [29]. However, to be fair, Sindorf is writing of a specific case of online newspaper comments sections and the maximum level of hostility appears to be: "Libhole ... your leftist BS Facts HAVE NO CREDIBILITY WITH ME! How many times do i got to tell you ... ya bone head" [30]. Nonetheless, in the case of the Return of Kings meet-ups, the governmental nature of social media commentary and engagement led to some productive between users.

Here I have examined how Roosh's original rape piece — or perhaps small fragments and headline-remixed paraphrases of it — was used as a productive surface upon which to display ethical self-inspection and confession by certain users on three Facebook protest groups. However, of course the piece was not used by all readers in this way. Future research could examine other readings produced by this piece, operating from within the broader "pickup artist" culture as well as the misogynist digital environment of "gender trolling" (Mantilla, 2015). For instance, what reading and discursive practices, governmental or otherwise, were deployed by pro-Roosh sites and writers? Remarkably, it is possible to find evidence of self-inspection in Roosh's own forum discussion of the events. Limited space here does not allow a full examination of this particular Internet space, but at rooshvforum.com, in a thread titled "How are you holding up after the meetup outrage?" Roosh clearly adopts a pastoral role, "It's only been 3 weeks [...] I wanted to check in with everyone and see if you had any remaining concerns or worries" (rooshvforum.com, 2016). One poster responds: "It taught me to take Internet anonymity more seriously," while another laments: "I saw the media lying on easily checkable facts, as usual and it then got me thinking. Over the past 3 years I've become aware of the MSM [mainstream media] doing this, how many other things did they mislead me into?" These are responses invoking self-inspection of the users' beliefs and form a process of subject constitution through being encouraged to reflect on what they have learned.

Nevertheless, whatever Roosh's intentions (and which I am obviously not defending) from the perspective of this analysis it is significant that his "How to Stop Rape" piece was read, inflected and interpreted, and eventually used by readers as a surface for the governmental purpose of confession and ethical self-reflection. Here we have readers stating — with their own name and Facebook identity attached — that they will "dismember or mutilate the genitals of the men who support this atrocious movement". It appears that many of these social media interactions involved users working through their own understandings and attitudes of issues related to rape, violence and sometimes free and hate speech, all occurring in real-time and in public view [31]. This is significant: self-governance does not simply account for the people who (apparently) changed their mind on their initial threats of violence. It also applies to those who simply voiced their disagreement with violence, those who engaged in discussions of whether or not violence was appropriate, as well as those who intervened.

Clearly, there is further work to be done — academically and at the level of policy — to examine the nature of how users interact on social media as well as the extent to which self-regulation both produces and suppresses opportunities for the expression of violence and aggression within governmental boundaries. In the case of the three protest groups discussed here, we might still find it astonishing to read something like: “Piece of fucking shit that needs his throat fucking slit !!!” (D.B. (female), comment in Shut Down The Sexists!, 2016) with the users full name broadcast on a non-anonymous public platform. However, it is important to consider the potential impact of the Facebook platform in this instance. As Papacharissi argues: “Twitter [...] prompts users getting ready to construct a post with ‘What’s happening?’ whereas the Facebook status update prompt most recently inquires ‘What’s on your mind?’” [32]. Or, as Phillips (2011) argues in her examination of online trolling of memorial pages on Facebook, “the self is embedded within Facebook’s basic architecture, which positions the user as the subject of every sentence he or she utters, indeed as the center of his [or her] particular — and therefore the — social universe.” Thus, against the background of Facebook’s own structure, arguably the governmental process of person-formation is embedded in the social media platform itself. Further research in governmentality might examine the extent to which other internet communities — such as the rooshvforum — respond (or not) to various social incidents by enacting this form of ethical introspection via discussion. Particularly, given the anonymous nature of usernames on many non-Facebook platforms, research could examine the extent to which this may or may not have an effect on the degree of self-display by users engaged in such governmental discussions. 

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### Notes

1. [https://www.facebook.com/events/182224665478457/?active\\_tab=posts](https://www.facebook.com/events/182224665478457/?active_tab=posts), accessed 12 February 2017.

2. Shepherd, *et al.*, 2015, pp. 1, 8.

3. Jane, 2014, p. 532, emphasis in original.

4. According to the announcement of the meet-ups, the intention was for: “The atmosphere will be relaxed and you’ll be able to talk about women, politics, travel, work, or whatever else interests you” (Valizadeh, 2016b). However, there is certainly a conspiratorial purpose also in that “during times of crisis” these like-minded men would have a “tribe [...] to offer concrete support and defense.”

5. Rentschler, 2014, p. 67.

6. As typographical errors in the social media comments cited in this study appear to be so frequent, I have simply kept all subsequent quotes intact without indicating “[sic]” where it would conventionally be used. Thus all language errors in quotes from the Internet are in the original author’s posting.

7. I should note that I could not confirm this specific quote from Brown’s article, though L.R.’s introductory statement of “This teams goal is to [...] mutilate the genitals of the men” is still publicly available on the Facebook event. Nonetheless, the number of other (still) publicly available violent threats I quote throughout this paper provide compelling reason for me to believe that it is likely “happy to bring the knives” and “I swear on my life I will rape you motherfucker” are legitimate. In addition, based upon my reading of the ethical recommendations by Markham and Buchanan (2012), where I do have access to the original sources (*e.g.*, via Facebook) I have decided to label posters by initials rather than any further identity, even though all of the comments cited here are publicly available. My primary reason is simply that the identity is irrelevant to the analysis — my analysis is an examination of the form that the postings and conversations take. Thus I am not judging the people who made the comments, or even their comments themselves or the ideas expressed. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that this is an uncomfortable area for researchers, and I find it a troubling issue in this present analysis. In particular, boyd and Marwick (2011) discovered that teens are aware of

the way that “The very act of participation in networked publics makes content widely available [so instead of] choosing what to include or what to publicise, most teens think about what to exclude. They accept the public nature of information [...] but they carefully analyse what shouldn’t be shared” (boyd and Marwick, 2011, p. 11). Thus to me it seems fair to assume that people know what they are doing when they broadcast something like: “I want to go to one of the rallies, and pick a fight” or “pin them down and tattoo ‘rapist’ on their foreheads.”

8. <https://www.facebook.com/events/839714459472992>, accessed 12 February 2017.

9. [https://www.facebook.com/events/1533299566967796/?active\\_tab=posts](https://www.facebook.com/events/1533299566967796/?active_tab=posts), accessed 12 February 2017.

10. For more on governmentality, technologies of the self, and their origins in antiquity, see Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1993, 1991, 1988.

11. Dean, 2010, p. 92.

12. Omernick and Sood, 2013, p. 8.

13. Bertolotti and Magnani, 2013, p. 294.

14. Facebook, cited in Karppi, 2013, p. 283.

15. Rose, 1999b, p. 31.

16. Foucault 1977, cited in Rose, 1999a, p. 23.

17. France, *et al.*, 2013, p. 2,147.

18. Rose, 1998, p. 155.

19. True, cited in Jane, 2016, pp. 284–285.

20. Jane, 2016, p. 290.

21. Probyn, 2004, p. 329.

22. Oddly, this comment in an Australian group was written by someone from the U.S. Other posters began questioning whether or not he was a pro-Roosh troll.

23. Makin and Morczek, 2015, p. 4.

24. For more on victim blaming and rape culture, see (Cook, 2012; Kahlor and Eastin, 2011; Skinner, 2012).

25. Rentschler, 2014, p. 70.

26. Chesterman, 2000, cited in Gelber, 2007, p. 3.

27. Jane, 2016, p. 10, n. 7.

28. Henry and Powell, 2016, p. 410.

29. Sindorf, 2013, p. 210.

30. Sindorf, 2013, p. 206.

31. From the perspective of Hunter’s view of governmentality, these sorts of interactions are extremely reminiscent of the sorts of classroom discussions that occur when secondary school students apply reading practices to examine traces of sexism and racism in media texts (see Bender, 2008, 2007; Moon, 1993; Patterson, 1993).

32. Papacharissi, 2015, p. 98.

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