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The Far Right: Only a Swipe Away

This past summer, on a family vacation, my family stopped in a small town to have dinner. As we were sitting around the table, my younger brother started mentioning Andrew Tate, who he said was the most-searched person on the internet right now. Now, I consider myself a pretty online person, but I had never heard of this man before in my life. My parents had not either. I was confident that this was some little trend on a side of TikTok that I was not privy to. However, when we looked him up, we realized my brother was right. We read more about him, and learned he was a champion of toxic masculinity, a misogynist who systematically tore down women in his videos. My brother, though, started defending Tate, who was the main content of my brother's For You page. Everyone apparently thought he was just funny, not harmful, but that he did make some good points. I was shocked and a little bit horrified. My parents were as well. How did my generally caring and principled brother end up spouting right-wing misogynistic rhetoric? I am on TikTok as well, but I had never even heard of Andrew Tate. How many other people had this happened to, and what was I missing?

Though political movements have ebbed and flowed for as long as we have had political systems, the Far Right is hardly a new phenomenon. However, its tactics and its outcomes have shifted over the years. With the extreme popularity of the internet, and especially of social media websites and apps, this movement has gained new ways to influence even more people. All social media platforms have elements of this, from Facebook to Instagram to Twitter, but the platforms that have gained the most attention in influencing young people to right-wing extremism are YouTube and TikTok.

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So what is happening in the ideological world? Generally, extremism is increasing. Not just in political issues, but also general views of the world. Extremism is caused by similar factors as group-think mentality: when a significant majority in a population agrees on the same ideas, they interact and continue to grow that opinion, from moderate to extremist.[1] This change is concentrated among young people, especially young men. Social media can exacerbate this change, because of the way that it supports and amplifies views that a person already holds. For example, in the case of an election, "those who are inclined to support a cause or a candidate may become quite excited if support is widespread on their social network."[2] The process is the same as those who end up joining terrorist organizations, according to terrorism specialist Marc Sageman, where "the interactivity among a 'bunch of guys' acted as an echo chamber, which progressively radicalized them collectively to the point where they were ready to collectively join a terrorist organization. Now the same process is taking place online."[3]

YouTube was the first time a social media platform with a highly developed algorithm began to convert people to Far Right thinking. When users watch a video, at the end a new video is suggested, and this cycle continues and continues. It became incredibly easy to simply sit and watch whatever this algorithm said you should watch next. YouTube suggests videos based on a variety of factors, including gender, time watched, and user tastes. It does still rely on a user deciding to watch the next video, and the algorithm has now been accused of nudging viewers into more and more extreme content.[4] And, unlike many platforms, YouTube has no age

[1] Ramos, Marlon; Shao, Jia; and Reis Saulo D. S.. "How does public opinion become extreme?," *Sci Rep* 5, (2015): 10032, https://doi-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/10.1038/srep10032

[2] Sunstein, Cass R., and Sunstein, Cass R.. 2009. *Going to Extremes : How Like Minds Unite and Divide*. New York: Oxford University Press, Incorporated. ProQuest Ebook Central, 23

[3] Sunstein, *Going to Extremes*, 25

[4] Roose, Kevin. "From YouTube, a Conversation On Extremism and Algorithms." *New York Times*, April 1, 2019, B4(L). *Gale General OneFile* (accessed December 10, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A580739943/ITOF?u=coloboulder&sid=bookmark-ITOF&xid=bed77b64.

restrictions, meaning one of its main demographics is young children and teenagers. They are

more impressionable, more likely to click on the catchy titles written by Far Right influencers to

"capitalize on the obvious algorithmic possibilities to try and steer young white men toward

extremist content."[5] The more that young people watch these videos, the more that they see the

ideas being portrayed as normal, reasonable, and interesting. The alt-right used YouTube as a

huge conversion and recruiting tool around the time of the 2016 election, in large part due to the

population of young people that was very online during that time. For them, movements like the

alt-right are "edgy and dangerous…cool and hip. It's that thing our parents don't want us to do."[6]

By using the algorithm to convert people from unwitting viewer to active participant, YouTube

has been an incredibly powerful tool for extremists.

To truly understand how easy it is to fall into this pipeline on YouTube, Vonny Leclerc, a

journalist for *The National* in Glasgow, tested it out. He had noticed a similar phenomenon with

his kids as I noticed with my brother. They started talking about extreme conspiracy theories that

they learned from "seemingly family-friendly YouTubers."[7] In his experiment, he typed "women

in sports," and let the algorithm choose which videos came next. They immediately became

political and extreme, about trans athletes, problems with fat positivity, and Nigel Farage.

Multiple times the stream of videos kept leading back to hate videos and right-wing political

views. It did not matter which direction he went, it got really extreme really fast. This points to a

larger problem, and the question of what YouTube should be doing as a platform to combat this.

A representative from YouTube, when asked why they cannot take down all violent extremist

[5] Pam Nilan, *Young People and the Far Right*, 1st ed. (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 48
[6] Nilan, *Young People*, 47
[7] Leclerc, Vonny. "Algorithms can lead us too easily to extremism." *National* [Glasgow, Scotland], July 23, 2019, NA. *Gale OneFile: News* (accessed December 10, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A620182595/STND?u=coloboulder&sid=bookmark-STND&xid=8437a206.

videos, said that it was more challenging than it seems. They said that "the line, as you can imagine, is sometimes blurry between what clearly might be hate speech versus what might be political speech that we might find distasteful and disagree with, but nonetheless is coming from, you know, candidates that are in elections and the like."[8] The platform says that it has guidelines about what can and cannot be posted, but obviously this is not so simple, leading impressionable young kids down the path of extreme right-wing thinking without them even knowing it.

If YouTube was the Far Right platform of choice in 2016, it has been usurped as the most influential by none other than TikTok. TikTok has an algorithm as well, but unlike YouTube where it only drives some of the videos being watched, TikTok relies almost entirely on its algorithm-based "For You" page. Immediately upon downloading the app, users are fed a steady stream of videos, and each engagement teaches the algorithm what to show them next. TikTok has taken over the social media atmosphere, especially among young people and Generation Z, with every other platform trying to figure out how to capitalize on its success – just look at Instagram Reels. Today, TikTok has become everything from a social platform to a news source. TrustData explains that "88% of web users would use short videos to socialize, 79% use short videos to get information and news and 70% use short videos to listen to music."[9]

When I gave in to the hype and finally got TikTok in 2021, the videos on my For You page were not very interesting at first. I got generic dancing, skits that were supposed to be funny but were not to me, and other content I did not like. Soon, I must have watched or liked multiple videos about teaching, because suddenly TikTok assumed I was a teacher, showing me almost exclusively videos about teacher hacks and teaching during the pandemic. This was interesting

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[8] Roose, *From YouTube*
[9] Yuhang Zhao, "Analysis of TikTok's Success Based on Its Algorithm Mechanism," *International Conference on Big Data and Social Sciences* (2020): 19-23, 10.1109/ICBDSS51270.2020.00012.

for a while, until I purposely stopped watching so many of these so I could get more videos

about my interests. And it worked. However, what if I had engaged with videos about cars

instead, and started getting male-focused videos, pranks, and "jokes" that were insulting rather

than funny? My experience on TikTok could have been extremely different, due to no conscious

effort on my part.

TikTok's algorithm is not an inherently dangerous idea, but what has become of it

perhaps is. The algorithm gives TikTok users an advantage over other platforms, because any

user can become popular through a single video without having to actively promote it

themselves. However, this system "has made the platform attractive to many extremist, racist,

and radical groups, including neo-Nazi and antisemitic individuals and groups."[10] A Far Right

influencer can post a video, and through the magic of the algorithm, have it shown to large

numbers of unsuspecting users. If the video includes anything that a kid might have heard from a

friend or seen referenced in another video, they are more likely to watch it, which in turn leads to

them being shown more extremist videos, and the cycle continues. The videos become more and

more popular, and reach even more people. That snowballing effect is part of how this happens:

"the actual human initiators of hate speech—Far Right influencers and content-generators—are

not large in number. However, by the time their latest hate speech of meme has been passed

around in the digital world, it will likely have appeared on the devices of a huge mass of

unaffiliated young people, whether they want it or not."[11] The content of these videos may vary,

but the end result is similar: a general increase in Far Right and extremist views. Callum Hood,

from the Center for Countering Digital Hate, sums it up well: "the TikTok algorithm in particular

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[10] Weimann, Gabriel, and Natalie Masri. 2021. "TikTok's Spiral of Antisemitism" Journalism and Media 2, no. 4: 697-708. https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia2040041
[11] Nilan, *Young People*, 49

is so aggressive that you only need to pause for a few moments before it will begin to recommend similar content to you again and again"[12]

What type of videos have gained traction specifically? Conspiracy theories in general, though not always promoted by Far Right groups, work towards pushing for skepticism of the world and extreme ways of thinking. The theories "do not have to make sense of an underlying reality, but instead capture a feeling tone that aligns with the fears and anxieties of viewers," priming young users for even more harmful messaging.[13] There are conspiracy theories about politics, including Israel, 9/11, Hilary Clinton, and more, all teaching people that they need to find the truth, and everything else they have been told is wrong.

Another example of this goes back to Andrew Tate. Despite claims to the contrary, TikTok's algorithm has been shown to promote misogynistic content to young people.[14] In an investigation by *The Observer*, journalists created a fake account of an 18-year-old, and as soon as they watched videos aimed at a male audience, Andrew Tate videos immediately began coming up. Quickly, even with no active engagement, Tate videos began dominating the account, filling the For You page with misogynistic videos from Tate and others. It is easy to see how this could have happened to any teenage boy.

Some conspiracy theories and damaging content is about the Holocaust and Jews, leading into a larger discussion of antisemitism on TikTok. Recent years have shown TikTok trends which overtly mock Jewish people, and increasing numbers of antisemitic comments and

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[12] Shanti Das, "How TikTok bombards young men with misogynistic videos; Observer investigation shows how online platform's algorithm pushed Andrew Tate posts to an imaginary teenagerInside the violent, misogynistic world of TikTok's new star, Andrew Tate." *Observer* [London, England], August 6, 2022, NA. *Gale General OneFile* (accessed December 11, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A712787999/ITOF?u=coloboulder&sid=bookmark-ITOF&xid=f996bbb1.
[13] Justin Grandinetti & Jeffrey Bruinsma, "The Affective Algorithms of Conspiracy TikTok," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, (2022), 10.1080/08838151.2022.2140806.
[14] Das, "How TikTok bombards young men"

usernames on the app. Though TikTok does have community guidelines that prohibit, for example, searching for "Adolf Hitler," users can still tag their content with the hashtag, skirting the rules.[15] The community guidelines, as a whole, are supposed to prevent abuse, yet some of the only action that is taken against antisemitism is to take down the offending comments, not harmful videos or accounts. The Center for Countering Digital Hate found that TikTok "failed to act against 76% of antisemitic abuse,"[16] bringing up the need for a more comprehensive study and the implementation of prevention policies.

The videos that do the best on TikTok are the shortest ones, usually under 15 seconds, which are hard for fact-checking algorithms to catch.[17] If automatic content filters are not effective, then what else does TikTok owe its users to keep them safe? YouTube initially responded to this issue by saying that they are not a media outlet but instead a social site, but that turned out to not quite matter, and the same thing is happening with TikTok. When many young people get their news exclusively from the app, the company has the same obligations as any other news and public service, to keep people safe. What has happened, however, is that the wrong things are being censored. In the Chinese version of TikTok, Douyin,[18] as well as TikTok itself, content that is critical in China, specifically in regards to their treatment of Uighur Muslims, has been censored.[19] Instead of letting the public know what human rights abuses are happening at the hands of a state, TikTok wanted to cover its own government's trail. Political

[15] Weimann et al, "TikTok's Spiral"
[16] Weimann et al, "TikTok's Spiral"
[17] Weimann et al, "TikTok's Spiral"
[18] "ByteDance tried to build an algorithm to censor Uighur livestreams on TikTok's Chinese sister app, a former employee has claimed." *The Business Insider*, February 19, 2021, NA. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed December 12, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A652295758/AONE?u=coloboulder&sid=ebsco&xid=282e2ca5.
[19] "A senior TikTok executive admitted the company used to censor content critical of China, 'specifically with regard to the Uighur situation'." *The Business Insider*, November 5, 2020, NA. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed December 12, 2022).
https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A640673351/AONE?u=coloboulder&sid=ebsco&xid=deb327f8.

content in general is apparently allowed on TikTok, as long as it is "creative and joyful,"[20] but

clearly that has not stopped the hate speech and extremism that still exists on the platform.

TikTok does try to censor videos that it thinks are harmful, from disinformation to eating

disorders,[21] but users of the app have noticed flaws in the system. In an attempt to prevent abuse

and exploitation of minors, videos in which users are not wearing clothes are censored. However,

these systems often flag videos of people in sportswear, swimsuits, or other appropriate attire

who are fully grown adults. Therefore, people will tag their videos with "fake body" so that

TikTok does not think they are actually showing their real skin. Certain words like "sex," "kill,"

or even "lesbian" have been found to get videos taken down, so creators discussing real events

that have happened, teaching sex education, or talking about their fights for human rights have to

work around the censors. "Seggs," "unalive," and "le$bian" are common ways to skirt sensitive

words when typed in captions. All of the workarounds that users of the app have to use on the

smallest things do not prevent antisemitic accounts from making content, conspiracy theories

from running rampant, and Andrew Tate from spouting untamed misogyny. The problems that

TikTok tries to solve are not always the ones that actually need solving. The algorithms continue

to promote harmful content, often at the expense of people trying to make videos to promote

positive change.

To see how the descent into Far Right content happens, two articles described

experiments that they performed. Kari Paul, Johanna Bhuiyan, and Charlotte Simmons from *The*

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[20] Anthony Kwan, "TikTok chief says political content is allowed on the viral video app as long as it's 'creative and joyful'." *The Business Insider*, November 18, 2019, NA. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed December 12, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A658311925/AONE?u=coloboulder&sid=ebsco&xid=fecaa333.
[21] Martyn Landi & Rachel Hains, "TikTok updates Community Guidelines around dangerous acts and eating disorders; It said it routinely strengthened its safeguards." *Evening Gazette (Middlesbrough, England)* [Online Ed.], February 8, 2022, NA. *Gale General OneFile* (accessed December 12, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A692601399/ITOF?u=coloboulder&sid=ebsco&xid=a6f184ed.

Guardian had three demographically different people create accounts.[22] They learned that not only does TikTok learn what videos you might like from what you engage in on the app, but might also get information through your other social media accounts if they use the same email address. It quickly learned that one user was an eldest daughter and Muslim, and that another one had kids and lived in the Bay Area. The only male participant in the experiment started being fed videos that seemed "designed to provoke an emotional reaction," everything from racist videos of Black women to ethically questionable content. From just a week-long experiment, it is obvious how even more vulnerable populations, young kids, could easily fall into this type of content. The other experiment was more focused on conspiracy theories, which were acting much the same as other right-wing extremist content. One user was brand-new to TikTok, and after one search for conspiracies, only took four days to develop a completely polarized For You Page – "almost all content was either promoting or defending partisan US politics, usually in the form of political 'humor.'"[23] Even a user who had been on TikTok since 2019 quickly found his feed full of conspiracy theory content, but also "found his research interests in digital culture, fake news, and mis(dis)information quickly represented via his FYP, even though he had never directly searched those terms through the TikTok interface before beginning this project." Again, through the algorithm, two men, with very minimal effort, found themselves embroiled in everything the Far Right recruits people with.

The issue with algorithms is not just limited to YouTube and TikTok, or even social media in general, but has instead permeated a significant amount of the way our internet is

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[22] Kari Paul, Johana Bhuiyan, & Charlotte Simmonds, "How does TikTok's uncanny algorithm decide what you see? We tested it on three people; A week-long experiment by the Guardian showcased how widely each person's experience and 'For You' page varied." *Guardian* [London, England], November 6, 2022, NA. *Gale Health and Wellness* (accessed December 12, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A725354346/HWRC?u=coloboulder&sid=bookmark-HWRC&xid=e2f53ba6.
[23] Grandinetti & Bruinsma, "The Affective Algorithms"

constructed. Antisemitism, for example, is not just popular on TikTok, but also on platforms like

Twitter and Facebook. The Campaign Against Antisemitism is worried, saying "we do not have

confidence in Twitter's capacity to address the rampant antisemitism on its platform."[24] Also on

Twitter, it has been proven[25] that Twitter's algorithms amplify political views of the right more

than the political left, and Twitter itself is not even sure why. Interestingly, many right-wing

figures themselves, including Donald Trump, have tried to argue the opposite, claiming that these

platforms censor them and are biased against them. Truth continues to be muddled. Even

Amazon, the world's largest online retailer, uses "search and recommendation algorithms [that]

channel customers into consuming increasingly extremist misinformation."[26] For example, the

Seattle Times article describes a University of Washington study showing that even searching

"vaccine" brought up top results that were almost entirely filled with anti-vax books. "Even

viewing those results may be enough to start sucking consumers down a misinformation rabbit

hole,"[27] leading them farther into Far Right ideological territory.

The role of platforms like TikTok is huge, and we might want to "consider algorithms *as*

culture – algorithms are not autonomous actants located outside of culture only to act upon it, but

are instead multiplicitous and ever-changing processes composed of collective human

practices."[28] The effects of conversations that happen in online spaces are not limited to the

internet. Marginalized groups face oppression both on and offline, in large part due to extreme

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[24] Weimann et al, "TikTok's Spiral"

[25] Rhiannon Williams, "Twitter's algorithms amplify right-wing content; TECHNOLOGY." *i*, October 23, 2021, 24. *Gale In Context: Global Issues* (accessed December 11, 2022).
https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A679951096/GIC?u=coloboulder&sid=ebsco&xid=4a2d3a85.

[26] Long, Katherine Anne. "Amazon search fuels extremism, report says." *Seattle Times, The (WA)*, April 29, 2021: A11. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*.
https://infoweb-newsbank-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/18229BDCC388D0D0.

[27] Long, "Amazon search"

[28] Grandinetti & Bruinsma, "The Affective Algorithms"

right-wing groups. Hate speech and extreme thinking like this is not good online, and can be damaging to the mental health of those affected, but the greater danger comes when these conversations turn to action. Violent extremists "first form relational connections [online], which later motivate their drift toward violence."[29] In recent years we have seen an increase in violent crime specifically targeted towards some of the same groups that are the target of Far Right hate online. Mosques and temples have been bombed and shot, gay nightclubs attacked, and so much more. There is no denying that the online and offline incidents are related. Therefore, young people who get dragged into the Far Right corners of the internet will see the events going on in the world around them and might see them as normal, perhaps even worthy of praise.

Politics are a mainstream way in which extremism manifests, most notably, recently, in the attack on the Capitol on January 6th, 2021. Purely on the political advertising side, the same people who are being exposed to extremist videos are also being exposed to political ads on the same platforms. Some online platforms, like Google and Facebook, allow political advertisers to use demographic data to target audiences, but others, including TikTok, allegedly do not. In a study conducted by Princeton University, the authors describe how TikTok says it does not allow paid political ads, but they still "document a significant amount of political content shared on the platform around elections."[30] We know that certain videos get aimed at male audiences on the app, and there is no doubt a lot of this political content is designed the same way. Even on the censoring side, "election related hashtags (Biden/Trump/Vote) were strong predictors for content moderations, while non-election related hashtags were not as much (e.g. BLM, abortion, gun)."

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[29] Talene Bilazarian, "Countering Violent Extremist Narratives Online: Lessons From Offline Countering Violent Extremism," *Policy & Internet* 12, no. 1 (2019): 46-55, https://doi-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/poi3.204
[30] Orestis Papakyriakopoulos et al., "How Algorithms shape the Distribution of Political Advertising: Case Studies of Facebook, Google, and TikTok," *Social and Information Networks* 1: (2022), https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2206.04720

So, if charged political topics still make it through the TikTok censors, it seems like a clear trajectory for those topics becoming weaponized.

After the January 6th attack, the U.S. government started to place more focus on figuring out how to end events like it, through changing the way that algorithms affect the political environment. Representatives Malinowski and Eshoo, among others, called on tech companies to stop having algorithmic promotion of news and information to be based entirely on user engagement, to prevent the spread of harmful content. The rioters who attacked the Capitol were deeply integrated in the algorithmic platforms, "digital echo chambers," which are "partly responsible for undermining our shared sense of objective reality, for intensifying fringe political beliefs, for facilitating connections between extremists, leading some of them to commit real-world, physical violence."[31] The link here, between dragging susceptible people into right-wing circles through silly videos that get more intense and motivating them to violence becomes more important than ever.

Young people are spending more time on the internet than ever before. We talk to our friends, date, and even work online. The way the world looks now, we are only heading farther into a digital dimension. Therefore, it is more important than ever to be aware of the content that we are consuming, both intentionally and unintentionally. Digital literacy is only a small part of what is taught in schools, and many kids do not know how to distinguish lies from reality online. AI tools, like the recent introduction of ChatGPT, will only make it even harder. Now, more than ever, understanding how easy it is to slip into an extremist world is crucial. As our society

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[31] "FOLLOWING ATTACK ON THE CAPITOL, REPS. MALINOWSKI AND ESHOO LEAD DOZENS OF COLLEAGUES IN URGING TECH CEOS TO FIX DANGEROUS ALGORITHMS, ADDRESS SPREAD OF EXTREMISM AND CONSPIRACIES ON PLATFORMS." *States News Service*, January 21, 2021, NA. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed December 10, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A649265967/AONE?u=coloboulder&sid=ebsco&xid=d2e29a9e.

continues to polarize, more young people will be drawn into the Far Right, which could be dangerous for all of us.

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