

Abstract

YouTube is biggest the social media platform in the world, Alt-right channels dominate the political discussion on YouTube. A popular belief amongst political science researchers is that YouTube's recommendation algorithm is responsible for pushing people into a "rabbit hole" and radicalizes them. A study by Penn State political scientists Kevin Munger and Joseph Phillips [1] challenges this narrative. We look at the different theories such as the Zombie bite theory and the Supply and Demand framework which they suggest to explain the rise of alt-right channels. We also look at the Alternate Influence Network of the media and emphasise it's importance in the present day.

1 Political Media on YouTube

Due to the specialization of written communication, people mostly opt for an audiovisual mode of information exchange. Undoubtedly, YouTube provides the best platform for everyone to exchange information most conveniently. Recent trends show that YouTube represents the true democratization of political media in the medium that has consistently proven the most popular and most potent. Surprisingly, this popular media site is also the most prominent social network in the United States of America. With access to data, models, and methods already developed to study other social networks, and attention to the specific affordances of YouTube and video media, scholars of political communication have all the tools they need to delve into this new topic

2 Being Skeptical

Qualitative media scholar Becca Lewis provided a detailed description of the existence and importance of the what she deems the "Alternative Influence Network" (AIN), which we analyze in quantitative detail in this article [5]. With the rise of white nationalism and the Alt-Right in North America and Europe has come fears among journalists and scholars alike that these alternative media outlets have radicalized a generation of Internet natives towards the far right.

A prominent theme in theories claiming YouTube is a radicalizing agent is the recommendation engine (the algorithm), coupled with the default option to *auto-play* the top-recommended video after the current one finishes playing. The algorithm tends to recommend alternative media (the theory goes), leading users down a "rabbit hole" into which they become trapped, watching countless hours of alternative media content and becoming hardened opponents of liberal democratic values and mainstream knowledge production institutions. Even if we accept the premise that YouTube is an essential space for radical politics, we argue that a model of YouTube media effects that centers the recommendation engine is implausible, an unfortunate update of the "hypodermic needle" model of media effects that enjoyed some prominence in the 1930s and 1940s but which has been consistently discredited ever since [3]. Metaphorically, this can be named as "Zombie Bite Theory."

3 Alternative modes

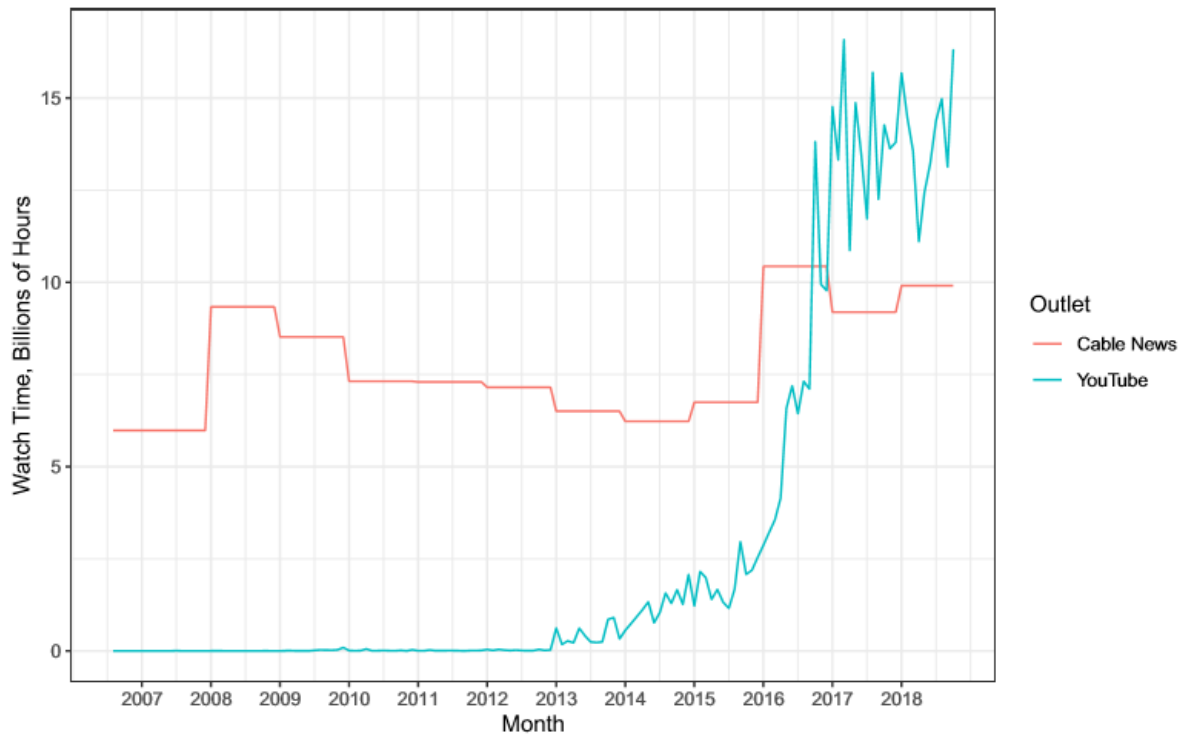
The roll-out of cable television and the development of partisan television media was the most politically important development in communication technology in the second half of the 20th century [4]. YouTube we study has already surpassed cable news in viewership.

A rough estimate of monthly total view time on the three major cable news channels (Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC), using viewership numbers from Pew. This is in comparison with estimates of just the 54 YouTube channels comprising the Alternative Influence Network (AIN).

4 A new perspective

A manuscript to present a qualitative and quantitative overview of political media on YouTube can be termed as "Supply and Demand" framework. Two reasons for such an increasing demand for YouTube can be listed as;

- Media on YouTube is videos: Videos are different from text or still images in a variety of ways that affects who consumes them, in what contexts they are consumed, and the effects of their consumption.



- YouTube is a media company: While Facebook has steadfastly refused to dene itself as a media company, YouTube has been paying “creators” directly for years. Producers create videos to make money.

The above affordances make the costs of starting a channel and uploading videos low, and content creation incredibly efficient. They also make forming communities around shared ideas and affinity for creators easier than on other websites. We contend that these aspects of YouTube allow new communities that cater increasingly well to audiences’ ideas to form. Instead of “radicalization by algorithm,” we argue that the true threat posed by YouTube is the capacity to create radical alternative political canons and interpretive communities to match. Below, we explain the applicability of the theory of para-social relationships to political YouTube content. There is a cap on how much news media a person can consume in a day; YouTube has dramatically increased then number of distinct political communities which are able to hit that content cap.

5 Zombie Bite Theory

The auto-recommendation algorithm of YouTube arises as to the main reason to explain radicalization phenomena. The idea is that YouTube is designed to maximize the company’s profits by increasing the audience time on the platform; its algorithms try to retain the audience by showing people far-right videos. Some other analysis about radicalization in the platforms shows evidence that commenters overlap between videos uploaded by the three more right-wing communities: “Alt-Lite,” Intellectual Dark Web.” and “Alt-Right”. And demonstrates that many of the commenters of the “Alt-Right” videos community have previously commented on other groups. This fact seems to follow a kind of radicalization pipeline of viewership behavior. Nevertheless, this is not enough evidence in favor of the “Zombie Bite” theory.

Indeed, previous studies that have tried to prove the relationship on radicalization due to the recommendation algorithm failed. Concluding, that algorithm had no remarkable effect on the audience interested in “Alt-Right” content.

After all, a random walk algorithm beginning at an “Alt-Lite” video will only be recommended a video from the “Alt-Right” about one time per 1,700 trips by clicking randomly one of the recommended videos each round. The same assessment was made by starting visualizing an average “control” video of a mainstream media resulting that took, and an average of 10,000 trips trough random recommended

videos to end up in an "Alt-Right" video.

To summarize, the evidence available demonstrates that any "radicalization" that occurs on YouTube happens accordingly to the standard model of persuasion: people tend to create new beliefs about anything by merging their prior beliefs with new inputs of information. Thus, people prefer topics that they are interested in, and if political, they prefer congenial content. Apart from this, persuasion happens when it does happen.

"Zombie Bite" is a theory that no one has fully articulated and defended, yet we cannot outright conclude that the theory is false. Below, however, it will be shown that viewership of "Alt-Right" videos has been in decline since mid-2017. This must be taken in to account for future theories about YouTube politics.

A variety of right-wing ideologies have explicitly declared to be in opposition with mainstream knowledge production, which are the ones that have flourished on YouTube. This fact brings us to a key question: *Why are far-right contents so popular and common on YouTube?*

"Supply and Demand" framework can give some answers to previous question.

6 Supply and Demand Framework

YouTube is a platform that matches both sides of a market, the ones who consumes the goods (viewers) and the part that sells or offers the requested goods (content video creators). Thus, to understand the rise of alternative ideological communities, like the right, it is necessary to cover the topic from market perspective.

Supply

The affordances of YouTube like the easy and efficient video content creation, have an effect on why political content creators flourished in the platform rather than on other Social networking sites. Besides, the content of new video creators can reach an audience with similar likelihood of viewership as any other mainstream media video on politics, thanks to the use of *tagging* and *titling* keywords. That is because the YouTube recommendation engine uses these keywords in each video.

In comparison with other social networks like Facebook or Twitter, YouTube has a *monetization* policy that allows creators to make money from advertising. Nevertheless, in recent years, this percentage on advertising revenues has decreased a lot on political videos since YouTube wants to minimize the risk that advertisers get associated with political extremists. But there are two additional popular methods for creators to make extra money. On one hand the use of live-streams and its "super-chats" that allows participants to make donations directly to creator. The second method is through the *Patreon* crowdfunding website, the creators plug-in a link to their Patreon accounts for direct donations.

The third major affordance of YouTube is that unlike Facebook or Twitter, which feature video but primarily use text as communication tool, the only and main medium for YouTube is video. Today's common devices like smartphones, webcams or laptops have all necessary equipment, microphones and cameras, to create content in a very straight-forward way. It is very efficient to create video of a few minutes at a minimum cost and with no involvement of other people on the production except the creator, leave far behind any other traditional broadcasting media. This is attractive for a lone, fringe political commentator, who can produce enough video content to establish themselves as a major source of media for a fan-base.

Furthermore, video, relative to text, helps people with an increased accuracy in detecting the emotions of the content creator and increases their propensity to respond emotionally to the content creator. Video takes advantage of both cognitive systems that separately process verbal and visual information, whereas text only provides verbal information. YouTube videos take up nearly the whole page, meaning creators can command more undivided attention. Also, creators show their faces and have identifiable voices, it can be perceived more like a direct conversation and the overall picture ends up creating an attachment among the audience with the creator. Moreover, each video has dedicated comments section which allow direct interaction with the community and the creator.

In short, the structure of YouTube encourages a dramatically more diverse political media environment. Because of the discoverability of YouTube videos, the enhanced monetization opportunities from both YouTube itself and technologies that have developed in parallel, and the efficiency and effective power of video in creating para social relationships.

Demand

Regardless the ease and efficiency for creation of videos on the platform is a necessary condition for the success of alternative political content that people decide to watch it. The far right can tag their videos so that they end up in recommendations and title them to attract clicks, but people will stop watching if they feel deceived or uninterested.

So that people consuming white nationalist media have not been radicalized by the supply of this content. Rather, the audience already existed, but were constrained by the scope of the ideology of extant media. The new proliferation of this content through YouTube just allowed the audience to switch into consuming media out of traditional cable news.

But it is interesting to ask ourselves *why the far-right has prospered more than the far-left on content creation*. Far-right has expanded in the last decade and the rest of the world can explain more of this variance than does fringe YouTube media.

Additionally, there has been a decline in trust in government, mainstream media, and academia since the 1960s. The American economy has moved away from manufacturing, leaving the white working-class worse than their parents with no full-time employment. Furthermore, the number of working-age men who are out of the labor force is also at an all-time high. In parallel, part of this potential audience have "preference for video" content rather than written content, as it is simply easier watching video than reading text. However, because of the lost of interest on traditional cable channel news bias, YouTube has put these people back on political content consumption. All of these trends has created a cohort of people with a litany of grievances and a huge amount of time to consume media. The fringe ideologies available on YouTube offer validation to this audience's frustration and disaffection, bundled with a seemingly coherent worldview that explains everything about contemporary politics.

Another factor is the para social relationship generated in opt-in forums that act like an echo chamber where fringe audiences discuss "the news" only with others who are like themselves. While mainstream social media lacks of this effective reciprocity.

These trends in specific and aggregate demand for YouTube politics can explain, even in the absence of radicalization or even persuasion, the bulk of the Alt-Right's audience.

7 Alternative Influence Network

Lewis (2018) [5] describes the AIN as the collective of political influencers who have made a name for themselves by cultivating a community of viewers who consume their video content such as uploads or live streams. These content creators guest star and promote each other's videos and channels frequently; thus it is called a "Network." Munger and Phillips have divided the AIN into five subcategories; Liberals, Skeptic, Conservatives, Alt-Lite and Alt-Right.

The Liberals are the leftmost flank of the AIN, examples include Joe Rogan, who has had several Presidential candidates on his show. The Sceptics are people who agree with most liberal values but do not consider themselves to be a part of the mainstream left. They regularly criticize the right for their identity and hate politics. The Conservatives support right-wing politics. They disagree with mainstream liberal principles. They have traditional pro-market and conservative beliefs. They explicitly oppose anti-Semitism and appeal to all races.

The alt-lite and the alt-right are racist, anti-Semitic. These groups often use offensive humor to mock, upset ("trigger") people of different races, women, gays, and other minorities. They are pro-Trump and

display explicit white-nationalism. They do not respect social boundaries and strongly support identity politics.

8 Conclusions and Discussions

Till date the media and academic scholars have believed that the YouTube recommendation algorithm pushes people into consuming radical content. Munger and Phillips, propose a different framework. The supply and demand describes the rise of alt-right content creation and consumption in the past few years. The authors suggest that people are getting radicalized by combining their prior beliefs with new information; this information is supplied to them by YouTube. The authors talk about the various features of YouTube which make it suitable for content creation for the alternate media. The authors also state since 2017, viewership of the furthest-right content has declined despite increases in the supply of such content. In its place has been the rise of more mainstream-adjacent conservative and liberal creators, consistent with a large share of users finding ideological communities that best fit their ideal points. These descriptive trends still allow for a large role of the recommendation algorithm, and it is still very possible that far-right content may radicalize (at least some) of its viewership. They also explain the reasons why there is a demand for this content in recent years. YouTube is an advantageous medium for fringe political actors to tap into an existing base of disillusioned individuals who are detached from the mainstream media.

References

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