

Social media and the rise of the far right

Full article title: Social media and the rise of the far right

Acknowledgments and credits: Not applicable

Each author's complete name and institutional affiliation(s): Ryan Thomas Williams, University of Sunderland

Grant numbers and/or funding information: Not applicable

Key words (four or five): social media, digital communication, think piece, reflection

Corresponding author (name, address, phone/fax, e-mail): Ryan Thomas Williams, University of Sunderland, Sir Tom Cowie Campus, St Peter's Way, Sunderland, SR6 0DD, ryan.williams@sunderland.ac.uk

Abstract

Historically, far right political groups had limited access to digital communications as a consequence of how our media platforms are constructed. There are certainly valid arguments made about whether including extremists such as neo-Nazis and white supremacists on talk shows and news slots is conducive to a good society, and is in the public's interest. The media has acted as a sieve in this regard whereby radicals are halted at the point of public messaging.

Think Piece

Historically, far right political groups had limited access to digital communications as a consequence of how our media platforms are constructed. There are certainly valid arguments made about whether including extremists such as neo-Nazis and white supremacists on talk shows and news slots is conducive to a good society, and is in the public's interest. The media has acted as a sieve in this regard whereby radicals are halted at the point of public messaging.

Nevertheless, due to the advancements in technology, and more specifically social media, there is virtually no limit to the audience we can reach via communications. Politicians use Twitter to debate issues and gage public opinion for new policy ideas. The significance of social media is that it allows for social dialogue, content curation, and integrations with web pages. Furthermore, a large portion of young people have most of their experiences embedded in social media, and much of this shape how they view the world. Facebook's timeline is the ultimate publisher; thus, the content becomes ever more influential. Enterprises have certainly tapped into this arena and compensate socially active individuals to promote or endorse their products and services knowing that their messaging will reach a large target demographic. These individuals are referred to as 'influencers', they are people who hold opinions that other people trust.

Far right groups are some of the most successful adopters to this form of digital communication, targeting vulnerable people online, often young white men. Their strategies have become ever more sophisticated, radicalising people using vlogs, live streaming, and web forums. Unfortunately, social media has become a breeding ground for this type of activity for the reasons mentioned above. In other words, vulnerable people trust the content they read online. Conspiracy theories, anti-immigration, and misogynistic views have all flourished in this environment.

Small Steps Consultants describe some of the strategies that militant groups are using:

"The group's strategy for online expansion is simple and deceptive: they post content about issues that attract poplar support such as opposing child abuse or animal cruelty, or campaigning to wear a poppy on Remembrance Day. This attracts more likes which they can

then target with more openly xenophobic, anti-Muslim messages”.

The emergence of social media have created new groups and movements because it offers a platform that is different to traditional media rules. In essence, social media is a far more diverse place to share ideas without a ‘troublesome gatekeeper’ to facilitate discourse. Hüseyin Pusat Kildiş, a researcher in this area at Ankara University, argues that freedom of expression has become a bit of a double edge sword

“although conspiracy theories have been around for a while now, social media has made it possible to produce and consume them on a massive scale. In other words, social media platforms help the globalization of conspiracy theories. A recent research study conducted at Harvard University reveals that alternative sources such as Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook produce more stories that reinforce conspiracy theories than mainstream sources”.

Some of the highest profile cases across the pond include QAnon and Pizzagate. In the U.K, we have similar conspiracies as with islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and Anti-vaxxers. They all consist of the same premise that there are ‘them’ and ‘us, the ‘elites’ and everyone else.

BBC’s Louis Theroux saw first-hand how this hate can grow on social media and through gaming communities in Forbidden America ‘Extreme and Online’.

Under pressure to compete, large U.K. based news organisations are reverting to ‘click bait’ strategies. People certainly read more news when news is bad, and this has been advantageous for both the far right and click bait news.

Despite some minor similarities in these strategies, one major difference is that Facebook and other social networking services are public forums and not publishers. In the Daily Mail, there must be some editing and source checking undertaken. Whereas Facebook does very little to check the accuracy of the content published. This, along with an echo chamber community of likeminded people results in a snowball effect of fake news.

The solution is perhaps increasingly complex. There ought to be tighter governance and new policy that represents the particular phenomena by our political leaders on the social media giants. However, right now the U.K. does not have the infrastructure to tackle big tech; in 2022, Nadine Dorries the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport argued that the internet was only 10 years old, just 25 years off. We have an inability to cope with this modern-day challenge, and I fear that the far right will continue to creep into our daily lives.