

UPDATE ON THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

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ALGORITHMS OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS REPORTEDLY FUEL SPREAD OF EXTREMIST CONTENT & SELF-RADICALISATION

INTRODUCTION

1. The rapid advancement of digital spaces has transposed extremist ideologies from niche corners of the Internet to popular social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube. These platforms have been utilised by many extremists as part of their online recruitment processes.

SOCIAL MEDIA'S ALGORITHMS & SELF-RADICALISATION

2. Social media platforms are now widely used by people of different ages, especially among the younger generation. For instance, according to *Global Times (CN)*, TikTok topped the list of the most visited websites in 2021, with the number of TikTok users reaching the one billion mark.

3. Design features of social media platforms have unintentionally promoted extremism, as their algorithms track each user's preferences in order to push content catered to their interests. Some platforms like TikTok and Instagram are well known for their powerful algorithms that tailor video recommendations according to its audiences' tastes.

4. The implication of these video recommendation algorithms is that a user who interacts with certain content or creators will automatically and continually be fed with similar content. To retain the user's attention, social media platforms will constantly push videos to the user's feed based on their preferences and likes. This in turn fuels the algorithm with fresh information when the user interacts with the content.

Extremist Ideologies on Social Media Platforms

5. Extremist recruiters set up social media accounts that advocate extreme ideologies and used 'coded language' such as misspellings to evade social media moderation. According to *Microsoft News (MSN)*, many extremist TikTok videos used 'memetic format¹' or utilised the platform's unique combination of audio, video and text to avoid violating community guidelines. For instance, over the Christmas holiday in 2021, ISIS uploaded TikTok videos urging supporters and viewers in West Europe to launch terrorist attacks by carrying hidden explosives.

6. Similarly, YouTube curates for its users a list of recommended videos based on their search history. According to *GlobalNews*, there has been an increase in the number of gateways into online radicalisation. Users searching for general topics like 'fitness' or 'health' could suddenly find themselves exposed to extreme ideologies. It was remarked that four clicks on an incognito browser were sufficient for a YouTube user to be exposed to videos promoting radicalisation and the channel hosts' Instagram profiles. Extremist groups have also used YouTube live streaming to get in touch with their viewers.

7. Likewise, *Dailymail* reported that Instagram's algorithm can lead users to extremist content based on what they had seen and liked. For instance, users who like 'sad quotes' on Instagram may find themselves pulled into extreme groups and content that promote self-harm or suicide.

¹ The memetic format refers to images, videos or pieces of text that are formatted to be humorous, and is usually copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with only slight variations.

ASSESSMENT

8. With the rapid increase in social media usage, some observers such as the Canada-based Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism have expressed the need for social media platforms to make swift and significant changes to their algorithms in order to protect vulnerable users – especially children – who are more susceptible to be influenced by extremist content.
9. Governments of different countries have been brainstorming ways to mitigate the harms of social media. For instance, the European Union’s Digital Service Act requires digital services to take actions to counter the dissemination of illegal content on their platforms or face penalties, including fines. Additionally, law enforcement agencies have worked with social media companies to identify and remove violent videos, as well as to conduct criminal and civil investigations.
10. Social media platforms could consider raising their age restriction to prevent early exposure of extremist ideologies to youths, or requiring users to verify their identities so that extremists could be identified and banned from the platform. Governments could engage with relevant institutions such as schools and community centres to conduct short workshops for parents and children on digital literacy and practising safe usage of social media.

CONTACT DETAILS

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