

/pol/arization: Online Forums as Breeding Grounds for Extremism

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Abstract

Freedom of speech and expression has been a fundamental right ever since the birth of the constitution, encouraging the spread of diverse ideas. Philosopher John Stuart Mill proposes a model for free speech as a marketplace such that the free flow of thoughts and opinions come into collision with each other as a way to discover the truth. However, the equilibrium is disrupted when online algorithms work to amplify like-minded opinions and stifle opposing thought. In this paper, I will examine the factors that make social media uniquely prone to ideological polarization as opposed to traditional broadcast television and new outlets. The combined influences of individual users, curation algorithms, and mass media gatekeepers create a dangerous mix of forces that drive opinions to the extremes. I will then explore how these factors manifest in echo chambers on the dark side of the internet. We will see how conspiracy theories spillover to mainstream media and make the leap from the virtual realm to the physical realm. Altogether, I argue that the current trend in online dialogue forces social media giants into a double-bind where they either allow misinformation to run rampant on their platforms, or they push them into the deep abyss of the web where fringe groups find breeding grounds and take on more radical forms.

The Calm Before the Storm

“The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation.”

“There is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders.”

“Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.”

The statements above are taken from a survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute in March 2021 that demonstrates how prevalent conspiracy theories have become within the American

population. The survey found that 15 percent of Americans agree with the first and last statements, and 20 percent with the second statement (PRRI, 2021); all these beliefs are core tenets of the conspiracy theorist that has emerged as a threatening force in global politics, QAnon. Even more striking is that the survey results reflect the beliefs of Republicans, Independents, and Democrats alike. Today, QAnon rivals major religions in the United States (Russonello, 2021), which has dangerous implications for the future of the political climate. With more people resorting to violence as a means of political advocacy and news sources becoming inextricably tangled up in lies, we must question how this national phenomenon came to be, where it might lead us in the future, and how we can best revert the damage that has already been done. In answering these questions, it helps to go back to when freedom of expression became a legal right.

The parameters of free speech have been an ongoing debate ever since our founding fathers drafted the First Amendment. British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1859, p. 19) advocates in his essay *On Liberty* for the free flow of thoughts and opinions to come into collision with each other as a way to discover the truth: “But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race [...] more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose [...] the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error”. In this marketplace of ideas, he argues that competition filters out falsehood and amplifies truth. Today, the World Wide Web borrows these same principles in creating an online melting pot of ideas. However, I will argue that Mill’s notion of market equilibrium does not always manifest itself in the virtual realm. In fact, it may do the exact opposite by amplifying falsehood and stifling the truth.

A particular subculture that I will focus on is the rise of online forums that provide a safe haven for white supremacy, antisemitism, and conspiracy theories. In recent years, these forums have continued to gain traction as mainstream social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter started flagging and banning content that fueled violence, hate, or misinformation. Yet, the increase in content moderation by social media giants did not curtail the demand for a community where people could freely express their beliefs. Therefore, users who couldn’t find an outlet in mainstream social networks migrated to online forums with looser content restrictions and higher tolerance for radical ideas. One notable example is Parler, a growing microblogging and social networking platform for Donald Trump supporters, conservatives, and QAnon followers. Their motto is “speak freely and express yourself openly, without fear of being ‘deplatformed’ for your views” (Parler, 2021). By framing their users as people who have been victimized by mainstream media, the selling point of the website -- and now mobile app -- gives a glimpse into the dissatisfaction fomenting in other parts of the web.

Of course, the case is not as clear cut as it seems; these forums operate at varying degrees of extremism depending on how deep they are located in the Dark Web (Baele et al., 2021, p. 73). The internet is built in layers and much of what we access online exists in the Surface Web: “the portion of the Web that has been crawled and indexed (and thus searchable) by standard search engines like Google or Bing via a regular web browser” (Sui et al., 2015, p. 6). However, the internet’s underworld houses 400 to 500 times more websites than what is available at the surface (Sui et al., 2015, p. 4). This is where many of the anonymous messaging boards reside. For example, doing a quick Google search of 8chan, one of the notorious anonymous image-board forums responsible for mass shootings across America, will not yield any URLs to the site. That is because Google banned 8chan and similar messaging boards from their list of indexed websites (Dale, 2016). Navigating to the website requires finding the explicit URL elsewhere using alternative search engines or hidden website listings (Sui et al., 2015, p. 7).

Across this complex network of online communities, I will examine the factors that make social media uniquely prone to ideological polarization as opposed to traditional broadcast television and new outlets. The combined influences of individual users, curation algorithms, and mass media gatekeepers create a dangerous mix of forces that drive opinions to the extremes. I will then explore how these factors manifest in echo chambers on the dark side of the internet. We will see how conspiracy theories spillover to mainstream media and make the leap from the virtual realm to the physical realm. Altogether, I argue that the current trend in online dialogue forces social media giants into a double-bind where they either allow misinformation to run rampant on their platforms, or they push them into the deep abyss of the web where fringe groups find breeding grounds and take on more radical forms.

Everything in Moderation

Before the creation of social media, people received their news primarily from cable television, word of mouth, or printed newspapers. There were screening processes for published or broadcasted content. There were social expectations that kept people in check, refraining individuals from stepping outside the bounds of reality. The inception of social media changed everything. Now, people can post anything publicly and anonymously, react to each other’s content, and spark debates, all at lightning speed. Many content creators amass a large following; they are influencers that can speak to millions of people at once. By virtue of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, we have witnessed a surge in social media as a medium for political activism. I postulate that this online phenomenon simultaneously creates a unique haven for extremism due to the conflicting interests and unexpected side effects of content moderation. On one hand, social media corporations rule public content with a soft touch, hesitant to

intervene in what could be profit-generating content. On the other hand, even when administrators crack down on offensive content, the perpetrators find other avenues to voice their thoughts, elusive spaces where their followers grow in number and become more extreme.

In the conversation of content moderation policies, *The New York Times*' podcast "How Facebook is Undermining 'Black Lives Matter'" (2020) sheds light on the compounding factors that influence big tech's decisions to flag, ban, and remove content from their platforms. The podcast explores the shift in dialogue surrounding the BLM movement on social media from "the primary organizing tool" to a sounding board for dissidents of the movement (1:55). In the wake of racist comments, there is little moderators can do to restrain destructive users given the blurry lines between hate speech and free speech. However, things came to a climax with a single Tweet from President Donald Trump:



FIGURE 1. Trump threatens BLM protesters with military action.

In his tweet, which was also later posted on Facebook, Trump openly threatened to use violence: "when the looting starts, the shooting starts." Therefore, his message was a clear incitement of imminent lawless action, which is not protected by the First Amendment.

Twitter and Facebook ended up taking two very divergent responses to Trump's post. As depicted in Figure 1, Twitter placed a warning label on the tweet to indicate the violation of their rule on glorifying violence and they disabled the ability to "retweet" the post, but they still kept the post up for people to be informed of the president's intent. Facebook, on the other hand, did nothing, likening it to any regular post on social media (10:53). What made Twitter and Facebook's respective decisions so drastically different? A lot of it has to do with their user base. Given that both of these

platforms are, at the end of the day, profit-driven companies, every decision they make involves retaining their users. Twitter's users tend to be younger and more diverse; it is home to many activists and journalists and has "a robust and vibrant black community" (11:47). In contrast, Facebook's population tends to be older, and thus, more conservative. Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, has vocalized that he does not want to be the arbiter of civil conversation: "Freedom means you don't have to ask for permission first. And that by default, you can say what you want." Zuckerberg has a history of playing a passive role in content moderation and much of this has to do with his business interests. However, things become even more complicated when political outcomes are on the line.

In 2016, mass media platforms received a barrage of criticism for allowing foreign interference in election outcomes; yet, even when they decided to crack down on misinformation in the 2020 elections, the criticism did not stop. On October 14th of 2020, in a final attempt to swing the elections, the New York Post published a scathing news story alleging that Hunter Biden had been corresponding with Ukrainian officials. Of course, the information was yet to be verified, but the headlines told a different story: "Smoking-gun email reveals how Hunter Biden introduced Ukrainian businessman to VP dad" (Morris & Fonrouge, 2020). With such a provocative front-page story, the article went viral within hours. Faced with a replay of the 2016 elections, prominent social media companies -- YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter -- had a choice to make.

The NYT Podcast "A Misinformation Test for Social Media" (2020) outlines the steps that each company took. On one end of the spectrum, YouTube did nothing and left video content related to the story up for further evaluation (6:07). This approach assumes that the story will run its course and its users will be able to distinguish fact from fiction on their own. Facebook announced, several hours after the story was published, that it would demote the post in its algorithms, slowing the rate at which the story spread "until it could be evaluated by third-party fact checkers" (6:22). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Twitter chose the nuclear option: they banned people from linking to the story altogether and locked the accounts of those who did because it violated their rule on sharing private information and hacked information (7:04). Essentially, they deemed it equivalent to a hacker posting personal information obtained from a data breach.

Despite the previous criticism for not taking enough action against misinformation, social media giants now received accusations, primarily from the right, of mass censorship. On October 15, Tucker Carlson (2020) from Fox News came out and labeled this "mass censorship on a scale that America has never experienced, not in 245 years". By using strong language like "mass censorship," Fox News appeals to their audience's sense of anger and injustice that big tech is manipulating the flow of information in Biden's favor. Laura Ingraham (2020), his co-anchor, followed up saying that "they're all engaging in censorship, so you're kept in the dark" and Sean Hannity (2020) announced a few days later "make no mistake, Twitter,

Facebook, they are not arbiters of truth. Cold, calculated political actors.” The idea of being “kept in the dark” reaffirms the public’s distrust of big tech, believing industry leaders have become so corrupt that they are withholding information to influence election outcomes. Labeling the industry’s actions as political gives Republican news outlets a simple workaround to rationalize the circumstance and incite the crowd with a well-known narrative that villainizes the Democratic Party.

In addition to content moderation, social media giants also determine the content that users consume through ranking algorithms. U.S. politics has seen an uptick in polarization in recent years and scholars attribute this trend to the role of social media in “exacerbate[ing] polarization by promoting echo chambers and filter bubbles” (Beam et al., 2018, p. 1). Contrary to Mill’s beliefs of a balanced flow of information where fact and fiction are allowed to collide with each other, people instead are isolating themselves into siloes of like-minded users. Algorithmic filtering is most certainly a tactic employed by social media giants to keep their users hooked on their platform, a sharp departure from “old-style edited newspapers [that] aggregate material deemed essential and topical by an editorial team” (Levy, 2021, p. 402). By and large, business interests govern the decisions of social media giants as they compete for users and engagement on their respective platforms. Through algorithmic filtering, they try to present content to their users that they hope they will enjoy in order to boost retention. Yet, these tactics prevent a balanced exposure to diverse ideas as proposed by Mill.

Ultimately, social media platforms have a disproportionately more power over the rules and patterns of online speech compared to legal entities. Because “free speech” is very loosely defined by the First Amendment, tech giants are tasked with creating community norms to regulate speech. While these companies do their best to protect their reputation and retain their users, they tread the fine line between freedom and intervention. Regulating and restricting online content is necessary in cases where there is an explicit threat to individuals or direct harm to society. However, in most if not all cases, there are dissatisfied users who feel silenced on social media. When their opinions are no longer being heard, these users go to other parts of the internet, moving over to alt-tech platforms that champion unregulated speech.

Diving into the Dark Web

Although social media giants are taking more aggressive measures to prevent misinformation from spreading on their platforms, it does not mean that there is no fallout. Renée DiResta (2020), technical research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory, writes in *The Atlantic* that “reducing the supply of misinformation doesn’t eliminate the demand.” For example, supporters of QAnon, a group often affiliated with the far-right that spread conspiracy theories incriminating the left, gravitated to fringe sites like 4chan and Parler when they found that mainstream platforms like Twitter

and Facebook would no longer house their opinions (Bond, 2021). DiResta (2020) warns that this bifurcation could yield more extreme discussions without the presence of “corrections and counter-speech,” an ingredient continuously reiterated in Mill’s model of healthy discourse.

On the surface, these alternative media platforms may not seem as formidable at first glance. Parler (2021), which has become a popular hub for Trump sympathizers, seems like an average run-of-the-mill social media site, characterizing themselves as “the world’s town square.” However, a closer look at their personalized moderation settings yields a telling facet of their inner workings. Users are allowed to filter out content they would rather not see, under the guise of free choice:

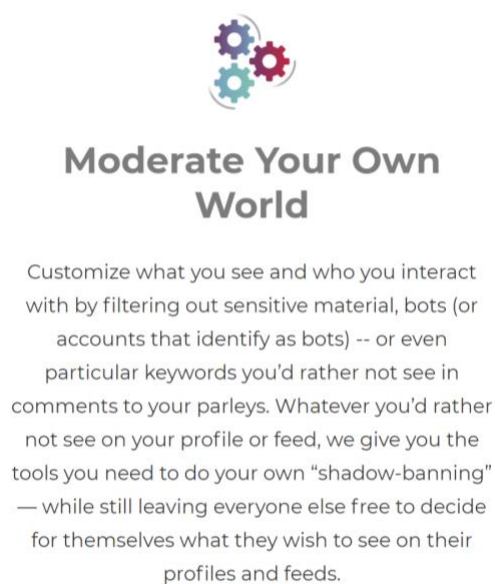


FIGURE 2. Parler’s personalized news feed settings.

The language on the website puts filtering content in a positive light, a way that “leav[es] everyone free to decide for themselves.” By giving users tools to tailor their own world, Parler is actively encouraging users to form their own, personalized echo chambers.

Cass Sunstein (2009), one of the most frequently cited authors on internet democracy, warns about the dangers of information silos in his book *Republic.com 2.0*. He argues that “people should be exposed to information that they would not have chosen in advance” as it expands media consumption outside of their immediate comfort zones, thus, preventing extremism (5-6). Years before the creation of Parler, Sunstein (2009, p. 44) already foresaw the dark age of social media: “In a system in which each person can ‘customize’ his own information universe, there is a risk that people will make choices that generate too little information”. The

model that Parler adopted lies in sharp contrast to Sunstein’s advocacy as it goes one step further than standard social media algorithms in letting individuals control the content they wish to see. However, what Sunstein could not predict is an even more insidious version of Parler, a space meant solely for discussing radically offensive ideas.

The constellation of anonymous messaging boards known as the “chans” came under media scrutiny after a number of shooters posted their manifestos on the /pol/, or “politically incorrect”, board of 8chan. Along with lone-wolf shooters, the board caters to the alt-right in providing a space for blatantly racist, white supremacist, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant dialogue (Baele et al., 2021, p. 65). 8chan also has a number of cousins -- 8kun, 9chan, 16chan, EndChan, etc. -- many of which are situated in the Dark Web because standard web servers have refused to support their platforms (Baele et al., 2021, 65). However, as of today, the predecessor of all these boards still exists on the Surface Web: 4chan, the birthplace of Q.

In October 2017, the QAnon movement began as a series of anonymous posts on 4chan’s /pol/ board from a user (or multiple users) under the pseudonym “Q”. The user claims to be “an intelligence officer or military official with Q clearance, a level of access to classified information that includes nuclear-weapons design and other highly sensitive material” (LaFrance, 2020). Q often posts in the form of cryptic fragments and riddles, dropping clues known as “breadcrumbs”, with comically conspiratorial phrases like “I’ve said too much” and “Some things must remain classified to the very end” (LaFrance, 2020):

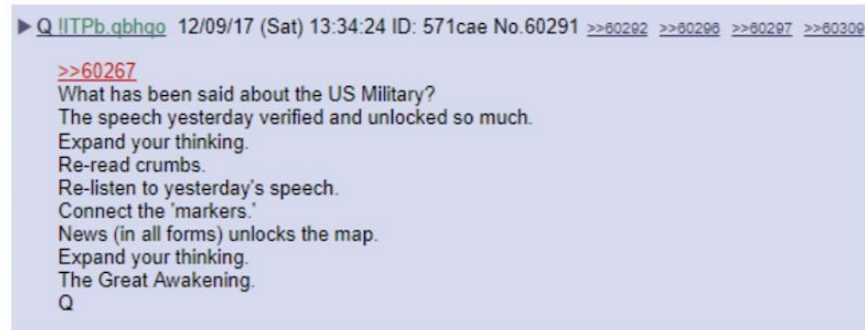


FIGURE 3. Q’s cryptic posts.

This tone creates an aura of mystery and omniscience surrounding Q, which is the very disposition that draws their followers in.

QAnon has created an entire persona to construct an alternative reality for their followers. First off, Q creates a very strong “us versus them” narrative in describing the victimization of their followers by mainstream media, or “MSM”:

Q !UWyye1fxo No.457 
 Mar 4 2018 01:46:40 (EST)
 Do you trust the MSM?
 Do you trust Facebook?
 Do you trust Google?
 Do you trust Youtube?
 Do you trust Twitter?
 Narrative.
 Censorship.
 Do not blindly believe.
 FAKE.
 They want you DIVIDED.
 TOGETHER, YOU ARE STRONG.
 APART, YOU ARE WEAK.
 ORGANIZE.
 CHALLENGE.
 FIGHT.
 DO YOU THINK ANTIFA WAS GROWN ORGANICALLY?
 Purpose?
 Watch the news this week.
 Q

FIGURE 4. Q post attacking mainstream media.

Q knows that their followers are primarily those who have felt alienated on mainstream media platforms. They characterize their followers as underdogs revolting against the establishment. The use of rhetorical questions feeds into the skepticism that their followers harbor against the mainstream. Moreover, the capitalized phrases communicate a sense of outrage and urgency to challenge the status quo, instead of being complacent in the fight against the “corrupt elites” on the left. Q also gives their followers a sense of being “in the know”, appealing to the human desire for exceptionalism, to be part of something bigger than themselves:


Q !UWyye1fxo No.44 
 Jan 19 2018 16:53:00 (EST)
 Why are we here?
 Why are we providing crumbs?
 Think MEMO.
 BUILDING THE ARMY.
 Not convinced this is spreading?
 You, the PEOPLE, have THE POWER.
 You, the PEOPLE, just forgot how to PLAY.
 TOGETHER you are STRONG.
 APART you are weak.
 THEY WANT YOU DIVIDED.
 THEY WANT RACE WARS.
 THEY WANT CLASS WARS.
 THEY WANT RELIGIOUS WARS.
 THEY WANT POLITICAL WARS.
 THEY WANT YOU DIVIDED!
 LEARN!
 FOR GOD & COUNTRY - LEARN!
 STAY STRONG.
 STAY TOGETHER.
 FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT.
 This is more important than you can imagine.
 Q

FIGURE 5. Q post attacking mainstream media.

The notion of an “army” indicates a large support base for QAnon, which increases one’s confidence in the movement, that they are on the winning side. Andrew Peck (2020, p. 335) writes in his commentary *A Problem of Amplification* that a common trend in niche topics reaching the

mainstream is the impression of a trend being “more widespread or important than it actually is”. Even when QAnon was still a fringe movement, they manufactured a persona of widespread popularity, which made them gain even more traction.

To see how QAnon emerged from the crevices of the internet into the mainstream, let us look at its role in the January storming of the Capitol. Accusations of voter fraud in the 2020 elections have consistently been circulating in ‘/pol/’ boards of 4chan. One such conspiracy theory central to the Capitol riot was backed by QAnon: the voting-software company Dominion Voting Systems deleted millions of votes in key battleground states (Greenspan, 2021). Yet, conspiracy theories do not just make the leap from the Dark Web to the mainstream on their own. There are often, if not always, intermediaries and facilitators, such as “intensely partisan outlets [...], that amplify ideas that bubble up from internet message boards” (DiResta, 2020). In this case, a far-right news outlet, One American News Network (OANN), released a report, which was later cited by Donald Trump in tweet:

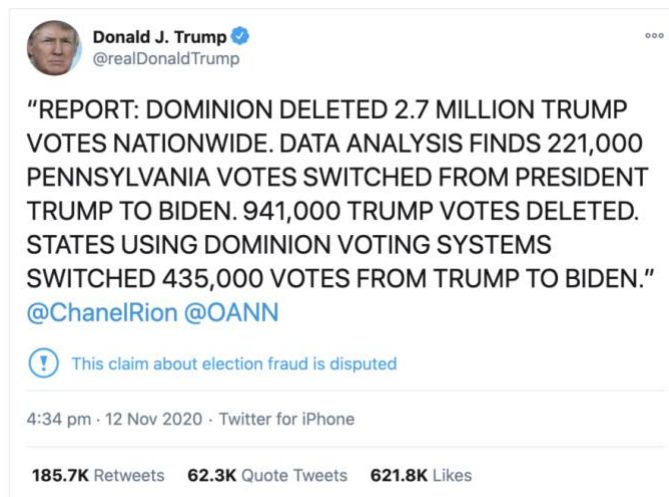


FIGURE 6. Trump tweeting the Dominion conspiracy theory.

For the U.S. president, himself, to back such a baseless claim raised what once was an isolated and underground rumor to the national level. Visibility in and of itself seems to give a gloss of legitimacy to ideas, however preposterous and false, “foster[ing] belief by repetition” and “distort[ing] small-scale vernacular communications into seemingly large-scale or pervasive issues” (Peck, 2020, pp. 330-332). When a large number of people hold the same belief, it becomes a form of reality. Suddenly bubbling up from the depths of the web and embedding itself in mainstream culture, QAnon has created a self-sustaining ecosystem that will continue to grow as long as there is a shared sense of marginalization and victimhood from the status quo.

Yet, however much we would like to think that conspiracy theories are the exclusive domain of the alt-right, it is important to note that the American center and progressive left are not immune to falling into the same trap of fictitious news. As McKay Coppins (2017) writes in *The Atlantic*, the left is also experiencing a rise in Twitter conspiracists that promulgate sensationalistic stories “alleg[ing] that hundreds of American politicians, journalists, and government officials are actually secret Russian agents”. Their focus on a common enemy, in this case Russia, to push forward their political agenda against the right shares an uncanny similarity to the alt-right’s rhetorical strategies. On top of that, the Democratic Party also has its fair share of hyperpartisan Facebook pages and blogs solely meant for featuring anti-Republican content and at times, fabricated news stories (Coppins, 2017). Although the reach of the far-left groups are not as far as those on the right, it would be a mistake to ignore the emerging trend on the left while the movement continues to gain momentum. As a result of the migration to alt-tech platforms, conspiratorial trends are emerging at both ends of the political spectrum and will continue to spread as long as traction exists in spaces for people of extreme ideologies.

Walking on a Tightrope

Restricting and regulating speech requires balancing an individual’s right to free speech with the safety of the general public. As online speech becomes more extreme, social media giants face increasing pressure to moderate content, and consequently, increasing backlash from moderating content. While algorithmic bias produces a skewed picture of the political landscape, false or misleading news gets added to the mix when radical or conspiratorial ideas are able to spawn in alt-tech platforms and spill over to mainstream media. DiResta (2020) describes this development in a self-reinforcing feedback loop: as mainstream platforms discover the “downstream implications” of certain online content, they have started to “moderate it with a heavier hand”. However, “[t]hat moderation, particularly when sloppily executed, is perceived as censorship by those affected” and thus, becomes a rallying cry for aggrieved users to migrate to alternative media outlets, where they are “pushed deeper into echo chambers” (DiResta, 2020).

Many alt-tech platforms see this as an opportunity to profit from division, so they become purveyors of stories that appeal to their target audience, employing the same insidious methods of filtering as their mainstream counterparts but to a greater extent because the users on their sites are already self-selected to have less tolerant political views. Ultimately, digital platforms, as free marketplaces of ideas, have failed to reach the harmonious equilibrium where truth prevails. At the end of the day, social media giants are trapped in a Catch-22: they either allow falsehood to circulate in broad daylight, or they banish it to the depths of the internet where it may resurface with more potent and radical mutations.

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