

The Convergence of Anti-Vaccine Content and Alt-Right Extremism: A TikTok Case Study

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Not the violent conflict between parts of the truth, but the quiet suppression of half of it, is the formidable evil; there is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides; it is when they attend to only one that errors harden into prejudices, and truth itself ceases to have the effect.

- John Stuart Mill. (Forbes, n.d.)

ABSTRACT

Social media algorithms are driving young people to increasingly extreme political viewpoints. Young people make up a large percentage of those who didn't get the COVID vaccine. Social media has recently been pushing vaccine-hesitant viewers who view wellness and health-related content toward alt-right extremist content. In this study, a TikTok case study found that anti-vaccine content views rapidly led to a proliferation of alt-right video recommendations, raising concerns about how social media algorithms might be contributing to political violence.

KEYWORDS

Social media, anti-vaccine, alt-right, algorithm

INTRODUCTION

The association between right-wing ideologies and anti-vaccine sentiments has become so natural today that it is difficult to imagine one without the other. However, there is nothing at first glance about the anti-vaccine movement that is inherently right-wing. Indeed, the rhetoric of prioritizing natural unprocessed products to advance health and environmental goals as well as criticisms of Big Pharma emerged on the left end of the political spectrum. Why, then, has 'anti-vax' become so closely intertwined with 'Alt-right'? How did health consciousness become "health freedom"?

One clue lies in the way social media platforms have functioned, redirecting health-conscious users to alt-right messages. For example, mothers who are 'crunchy' — who want to practice natural living and who are seeking nontraditional methods of keeping their families healthy — often visit similarly crunchy accounts on social media, where influencers advertise everything from toxin-free meal plans to meditation. However, this health content can quickly turn into something else. One mother's account demonstrates this phenomenon: she started out looking for advice on breastfeeding her baby, and found her crunchiness quickly turned into something more dangerous. Wanting to do her best for her children, she

began to follow more and more alternative medical advice. Soon, she was avoiding all products with “toxins” and not vaccinating her children out of fear that vaccines contained toxic materials. But nothing she did felt like enough: “For each boogeyman you kill,” she describes, “at least two more pop-up. Soon there are invisible threats everywhere like EMF and Wi-Fi... There was no safe space. Dangers were everywhere. I could not relax. I lost myself completely. In trying to make sense of it all, I looked for new identities and kinship”(Back to the Vax, n.d.). This desire for kinship soon brought her to “groups with traditional values” who offered her respite and purpose, and she began to rethink her role in society as a woman (Back to the Vax, n.d.). From there, she was led to Alt-Right videos. She started to believe their conspiracies. Clearly, threats to her health hit a nerve for her, driving her toward content creators who would give her more “black and white” advice about the world (Back to the Vax, n.d.).

In this project, I argue that anti-vaccine social media content is connected to the Alt-Right radicalization of young Americans because of its powerful infectiousness. Health freedom content has successfully led to the Alt-Right recruitment of mothers originally in the wellness community. I believe that the way that anti-vaccine messages capitalize on fears of losing individual autonomy make them well poised as a right-wing recruitment strategy for even younger individuals. It is well accepted that anti-vaccine content compromises public health in an obvious way: it convinces viewers to remain unvaccinated, leading to the spread of disease. But I argue that it poses a different public health issue, too. By leading young Americans toward Alt-Right radicalization, anti-vaccine content is contributing to our national epidemic of loneliness and to the threat of extremist violence.

YOUNG ADULTS AND THE ANTI-VACCINE MOVEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Most people know someone who lost their life to COVID, or if not, remember the loneliness caused by months in isolation. One unique aspect of the pandemic was that everyone alive at the time experienced it. Seemingly, it should have been a unifying force: humans versus viruses. Instead, the pandemic exposed rifts in our country’s politics.

The COVID-19 vaccine first became available to American adults in December 2020, and to teenagers aged 12-15 in May 2021 (Office of the Commissioner, 2021). For many Americans, it signalled the beginning of a new era where they were free to see loved ones again. And yet, the CDC estimates that at least 232,000 deaths between May 2021 and September 2022 could have been prevented by the COVID vaccine (Jia et al., 2023). Young adults made up a disproportionate percentage of the unvaccinated: In July 2021, only 39.5% of Americans aged 18-24 were fully vaccinated, compared to 68% of the general population (Lantry, 2021). Many young adults believed that COVID didn’t pose as great a risk to them, so they didn’t need to take the vaccine. But interestingly, according to a December 2021 Pew research survey, approximately 35% of unvaccinated adults didn’t get vaccinated

because they “d[idn’t] trust the government”(U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). This statistic highlights a hidden force driving the low levels of vaccination among young adults. Somehow, they were convinced that the government at best did not have their interests at heart, and at worst, had malicious intentions. Where did this feeling come from? How did it spread?

THE MODERN ANTI-VACCINE MOVEMENT AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN CONSPIRACY THEORY

Anti-vaccine sentiments have existed as long as vaccines, as has the health freedom movement. In the 19th and 20th centuries, opponents to traditional medicine advocated for botanical alternatives and formed a National League for Medical Freedom to change government regulations of medical practices. Vaccine skeptics were concerned about the efficacy of early vaccines like the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine. However, concerns steadily decreased until the early 2000s. Much of the modern American anti-vaccine movement can be traced, at least in part, to a now-retracted paper linking autism to vaccines (Hotez, 2021). More and more parents have begun to oppose government vaccine mandates, and the anti-vaccine movement has adopted health freedom rhetoric to promote its cause. The modern anti-vaccine movement is also especially concerned that large pharmaceutical corporations or “Big Pharma,” force individuals to put unknown materials into their bodies in the interest of profits (Cryst et al., 2022). Modern anti-vaccine messages tend to be anti-establishment and pro-individual freedom and often, are spread through conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories have been around since the founding of our nation. But historian Kathryn Olmsted believes that the subject of conspiracy theories shifted toward the government around World War I. The Espionage Act of 1917 allowed the federal government to spy on and punish antiwar dissidents. (Olmsted, p. 4–5). Americans felt less and less like they could easily understand what the government was up to. Then, the Freedom of Information Act of 1966 allowed Americans to access heavily redacted government documents. Reading these out of context, they could construct their own narratives about the government’s doings. Their theories were not always unfounded. Nixon *was* punishing his enemies, and the FBI launched its COINTELPRO program during the Cold War to “infiltrate” and “neutralize” dissident groups (Olmsted, p. 10). If Americans were worrying that the government was plotting against them, it was because sometimes, they were correct. One American faction in particular had a special affinity for conspiracy theories, and has wielded them quite successfully for its political aims.

THE RISE OF THE ALT-RIGHT

As conspiracy theories began to take deep root in the American imagination, several political movements in the United States were growing that would eventually coalesce into one. One was the white nationalist movement. The

Ku Klux Klan grew in numbers following the release of the 1917 film, *The Birth of a Nation* (Hawley, 2017, p. 23). Other white nationalist groups also emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Some groups, but not all, were inspired by the Nazis. Another political movement, paleoconservatism, appeared in the 1980s. Paleoconservatism was a response to the more moderate neoconservative movement of the 1970s. Paleoconservatives opposed government racial equality initiatives and were often openly racist. They criticized traditional conservatives and wanted to change the look of American conservatism (Hawley, 2017, pp. 29–30). Finally, the radical libertarian movement, while not inherently racist and often racially tolerant, opposed identity politics and government intervention (Hawley, 2017, p. 33). Many white Americans believed that immigrants and minorities were taking their jobs because of government equality initiatives, and found libertarianism attractive. As Y2K came and went, members and ideas from these social movements combined into a new phenomenon: the Alt-Right.

The Alt-Right is unlike any other American political movement in terms of where it lives, who its members are, and the ideas it promotes. The movement exists almost entirely online, although it has had physical manifestations like the January 6, 2021 insurrection. The Alt-Right is much younger than previous right-wing movements, and often operates through trolling (rude commentary intended to make fun of content producers) and provocative content. And though it is labeled as a right-wing movement, the Alt-Right shares few beliefs with mainstream conservatives, and in fact views much of traditional Republican policy with contempt (Hawley, 2017, p. 17). This dissociation from traditional conservatism is a rebranded vestige of paleoconservatism. Some scholars use the term “Alt-Right” interchangeably with ‘white nationalist’, because racism is at the core of the Alt-Right. But not all white nationalists are on the Alt-Right, and many white nationalists exist in physical communities with strong hierarchies, rules, and Christian family values that the Alt-Right rejects. At its core, the Alt-Right rejects large establishments and people with power: the government, big corporations and industries (like ‘Big Pharma’), and coastal elites (Southern Poverty Law Center). The Alt-Right is scornful of anyone whom they consider mainstream.

Because the Alt-Right exists mainly online and operates through online humor and intimidation tactics, it benefits from and attracts members who are young and good at navigating the internet. Richard Spencer, a right-wing political writer who coined the term “Alt-Right,” says, “it is no coincidence that so many in the Alt-Right are tech savvy... a lot of these people came to these ideas by reading...real analysis on the internet. They were willing to... get their philosophy from unusual sources, from nonauthoritative sources” (Hawley, 2017, p. 78). Indeed, a lot of Alt-Right ideas have spread through new forms of media: internet memes and trends.

While memes are a democratic format because they can be created by anyone, their wide reach does not mean that they are not being strategically

employed. One Alt-Right supporter posted an article called “Advanced Meme Warfare” on pastebin, a site that allows users to paste and share text. The anonymous user described methods for successful PR. Speaking in relation to the 2016 election, the user said that their side would be facing “an upward battle” because Democrats “own almost the entirety of the [mainstream media]” but that “meme magic is real and our collective effort has the power to produce some pretty incredible results” (Hawley, 2017, p. 87). This sentiment demonstrates an intentional effort to recruit members and to spread Alt-Right beliefs through memes.

The Alt-Right’s ‘memeing’ is also powerful because it conveys a playful derision of authority, which attracts young people. Young white Americans, especially those who are facing a tough economic climate and believe that government DEI initiatives are taking opportunities away from them, may encounter anti-government memes and conspiracies online. Drawn to the idea that the government is plotting against them and enjoying the ironic and humorous tone of Alt-Right content (Hawley, 2017, p. 71), they may pursue more. As they spiral further and further into the online world of the Alt-Right, they become increasingly radicalized. One such gateway idea into the Alt-Right movement is anti-vaccine conspiracy theories.

THE PATH FROM VACCINES TO THE ALT-RIGHT MOVEMENT

Before continuing, it’s important to clarify one point. Not all anti-vaxxers are part of the Alt-Right movement, and not all members of the Alt-Right movement are against vaccination. However, there is a strong overlap between the two movements. Both groups are built on an anti-government, anti-mainstream-media sentiment. Many members of the Alt-Right organized anti-vaccine protests during the pandemic (ADL, n.d.). In addition, one conspiracy theory, the Great Replacement theory, claims that there is a plot to destroy the white race brewing in the United States (Bridge Initiative, n.d.). Some conspiracy theorists believe that vaccines are a government method of population control, and are an example of how the government is trying to depopulate the white race (ADL, n.d.).

The anti-vaccine movement is especially effective at drawing attention because it is built on the powerful premise of bodily autonomy. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum lists bodily integrity and bodily health as central human needs for a flourishing human life (Nussbaum, 2020). Bodily control is the first step to controlling our external lives, and feeling in control of our bodies is central to our emotional well-being. One psychological study found that of any measure, autonomy had the highest correlation with psychological well-being in young adults (De-Juanas et al., 2020). When young adults encounter media that suggests that their bodily autonomy is being violated, they feel especially motivated to push back against forces they feel are violating them, and more so than if they felt their property or some abstract rights were being taken away.

Additionally, anti-vaccine content often capitalizes on outrage. A study done by Stanford's Internet Observatory found that many COVID anti-vaccine posts had sensationalized, emotionally charged headlines (Cryst et al., 2022). Posts that elicit moral outrage get much more engagement online than low-emotional-valence posts. Given the inflammatory tone of many anti-vaccination posts, it is understandable that they attract attention. Anti-vaccine content thus draws young people in with emotionally destabilizing posts, and then they begin a content spiral.

Sociologist Cynthia Miller-Idriss describes the next step, "algorithmic radicalization," in which algorithms create "filter bubbles" of content that are "personal, unique universes" that reduce the chances that individuals will interact with a diversity of views (Brady et al., 2021). Miller-Idriss also notes that the algorithms promote "crossover content" that links specific issues (such as vaccines) with broader Alt-Right content (Miller-Idriss, p. 147). This content serves to introduce new Alt-Right ideas to solidify users' investment in the Alt-Right movement. Engaging with specific Alt-Right-adjacent issues online leads to recruitment into the broader movement.

In order to better comprehend the Alt-Right's methods of recruitment and see whether algorithms would lead me from anti-vaccine posts to Alt-Right posts, I decided that it would be helpful for me to experience content myself. I recognize that the initial discourse around the COVID-19 vaccine has died down by the time of this experiment (2025), but vaccinations continue to be a contested issue, and the idea of health freedom continues to be relevant (Miller-Idriss, p. 147) and linked to the Alt-Right movement (Morgan, 2024).

A JOURNEY DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

A short exploration on TikTok demonstrated the beginnings of crossover content and algorithmic radicalization (Belew, 2022). To conduct my exploration, I created an anonymous TikTok account. Because of the brevity of my exploration, I didn't have time to wait for an anti-vaccine post to come up naturally on my "for you page" and then engage with it. This would have been ideal, because I hypothesize that accidentally stumbling across anti-vaccine content is the first step in Alt-Right recruitment. But over the course of five days, I employed anti-vaccine or anti-vaccine-adjacent search terms and observed the content that my "for you page" fed me.

The first two terms that I used, "medical freedom" and "vaccine choice," were informed by a linguistic analysis that found that those two were among the top ten phrases used by vaccine skeptics online (DeDominicis et al., 2020). I avoided using the term "anti-vaxx" at first, because the study had found that variations of that phrase were most commonly used in vaccine supportive documents (DeDominicis et al., 2020). I then expanded my searching a bit, focusing on anti-vaccine politicians and figures: the terms I used were "trump," "joe rogan," a popular right-wing podcaster who had initially claimed that young people did not need the COVID vaccine (Flynn, 2021) and who brought anti-vaccine ideas onto his podcast (Demissie, 2024),

“Robert F. Kennedy Jr,” and “nick fuentes,” an Alt-Right influencer who had held an anti-vaccine rally (Advance/SILive.com Staff Reports, 2021). Next, I searched vaccine-related trends: “magnet challenge,” a trend that appeared claiming that COVID vaccines contained microchips and so magnets would stick to injection sites (Cryst et al., 2022), and then “magnet from vaccines” and “crunchy lifestyle.”¹

My “for you page” yielded interesting results. I saw content from Candace Owens, a right-wing political influencer who had recently published a podcast skeptical of COVID vaccines (This Is Why I Choose Not to Vaccinate My Kids, 2024). I was also fed more broad political content. Some notable examples are shown in Fig 1. A common thread through many videos was the anti-government sentiment they expressed, even unrelated to vaccinations. Many conveyed resentment of the government for economic issues, or a distrust of government. This finding is in line with the idea that the anti-vaccine movement and the Alt-Right movement share anti-establishment views. Though none of the posts I encountered expressed violent Alt-Right ideas, the normalizing of “extreme views” and being a “conspiracy theorist” represented a gateway into more dangerous Alt-Right viewpoints.

¹An interesting note: when searching for “crunchy” content I saw many videos telling users how to find natural living content while avoiding the “crunchy-to-alt-right pipeline.” I didn’t click on these (because I didn’t want to avoid the pipeline) but I thought it was interesting that the phenomenon was so well-known.

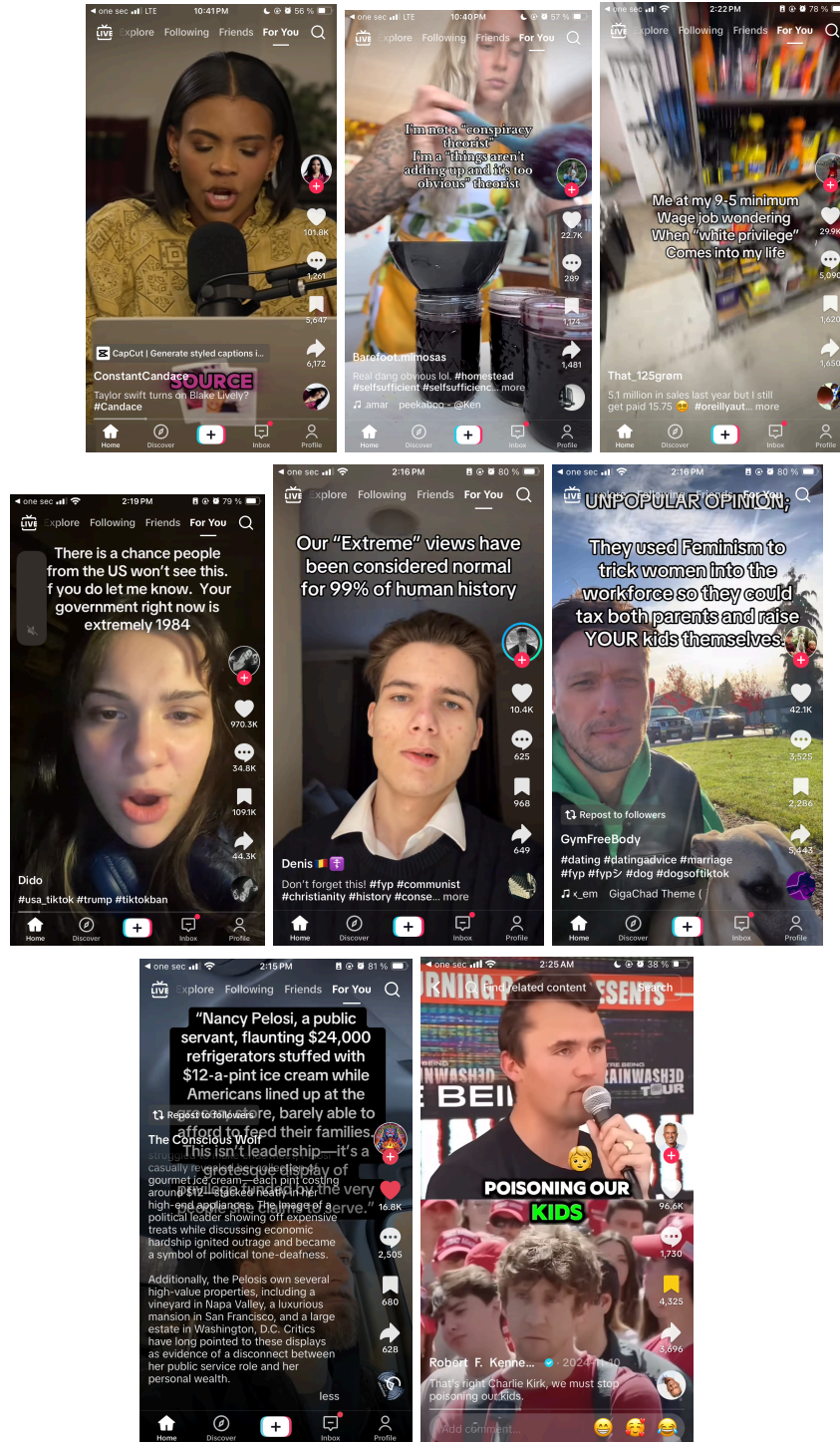


Fig 1. Examples of TikToks I encountered on my “for you page” after searching for anti-vaccine content. Many expressed a mistrust or resentment towards the government. Some quotes include, “Our ‘Extreme’ views have been considered normal for 99% of human history,” “Me at my 9-5 minimum Wage job wondering When ‘white privilege’ comes into my life,” “poisoning our kids,” “There is a chance people from the US won’t see this.

If you do let me know. Your government right now is extremely 1984,” and “They used Feminism to trick women into the work force so they could tax both parents and raise YOUR kids themselves.” This sample was representative of the broader content that I experienced on my “for you page.”

The rapidity with which my TikTok algorithm began to feed me anti-government, pro-conspiracy content solidifies the idea that anti-vaccine content can lead to Alt-Right radicalization. TikTok created a “filter bubble” for me which reinforced my supposed anti-vaccine views and suggested crossover content that it believed I would like. If I did feel that the government had malicious intent towards me, videos on my “for you page” would certainly appeal to my sense of suspicion and bitterness toward the government, leading me to engage more with that content and creating a vicious cycle.

CONCLUSION

Incidents of Alt-Right violence often leave the public wondering how the perpetrators could possibly hold such extreme beliefs. Many Americans might think of in-person white supremacist organizations such as the KKK as the primary incubators for these extremist viewpoints. They certainly were in the twentieth century. But as our lives become increasingly online, we must investigate other hidden forces that radicalize individuals.

Anti-vaccine content, which was widespread during the pandemic and continues to be widely discussed in the United States, has revealed one less obvious recruitment tactic for the extreme right. By capitalizing on their existing anger and fear of large establishments, weaponizing humor, and using the help of polarizing algorithms, Alt-Right content producers are able to reach and appeal to users who engage with anti-vaccine content. In order to effectively understand extreme polarization and white supremacist violence in the United States, we must look at wellness-related online content, too.

Online radicalization is not only contributing to polarization, but is a health concern for young Americans. “Radicalization is a public health crisis,” says Caleb Cain (CNN, 2019). As young adults spend more time online with radical content, they feel increasingly isolated, like Cain, and are sometimes driven to violence. The former U.S. Surgeon General described Americans’ “epidemic of loneliness and isolation,” partly driven by social media, as one of the most pressing public health issues of our time (Murthy, 2023). Education and mental health support are some ways to combat this crisis. Additionally, it could be valuable to hold online platforms accountable for polarizing algorithms. Regulating “filter bubbles” and forcing tech platforms to diversify the content that users see through legislation like the EU Digital Services Act could help to address the spiral from health-related content into extreme views.

Young adults are an attractive target for a movement that needs the internet. No user can be held blameless for their online behavior, and we must take violent extremism seriously. But by recognizing the history of the anti-vaccine and Alt-Right movements, the psychological strategies used by Alt-Right influencers, and the power of algorithms, we can better understand how impressionable young adults might develop extreme beliefs. Ultimately, behind every screen is a human.

LIMITATIONS

This project was exploratory in nature, and reflects just my own experiences on social media. Additionally, because of time constraints, I used deliberate search queries for TikTok content and then explored how that affected my “for you” page. Since I developed selection criteria based on my own research, it is possible that confirmation bias affected which content I highlighted.

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