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“A Blueprint for Radicalization”: Radical Communities on Twitter

Having formerly mocked Twitter, I finally joined the social media site in 2015 after years of lampooning it as merely a site where people posted minute-by-minute updates of their trips to the bathroom. Between my absorption of this perception of Twitter and my eventual installation of the app to follow the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign, the site had transformed radically, shifting from a forum for short-length, casual communications to a highly polarized political battleground. In this essay, I examine how Twitter, the prominent short-form social media website, contributes to the spread of right-wing conspiracies and radicalizes those who consume these conspiracies. I suggest similarities between the jihadi recruiters using Twitter as a conduit and the communities formed around right-wing conspiracies. I detail how Twitter allows radicalizers to contact otherwise unreachable susceptible populations and facilitates “political jamming,” the use of internet culture to transmit radical ideas. After examining these problems and assessing the issues with how other platforms have addressed right-wing radicalization, I argue that Twitter’s policies fail to address major swaths of the issue and must be updated.

I often jokingly say that I was “radicalized by Twitter,” meaning that I learned many of my strongly held leftist beliefs from the collective thoughts of the many politicians, journalists, and activists I follow. Twitter personalities are swiftly frothed up into a rage, and I confess that I often get caught up in the outrage, which translates into my real-life political arguments. Those

whom I follow are aware of Twitter's potential toxicity and its inability to accurately represent national ideological trends, so I have plenty of reminders to keep myself grounded. Resultingly, I use Twitter passively, reading the thoughts of the well-sourced and fact-checked rather than posting heavily myself. However, in Twitter's conspiratorial cesspools, no such checks, nor any such good-faith actors, exist. I'd seen glimpses of these communities when various journalists commented on trends like #Pizzagate and QAnon but dismissed them as quaint fringe groups. However, when they exploded into real-life violence in the pipe bomb mailings, I became curious about how these communities radicalized their followers.

Jihadi Cool: Origins of Social Media Radicalization

Contemporary discussions of the use of social media for radicalization and terroristic recruitment often begin with jihadi-style terrorist organizations in the Middle East. Indeed, many anti-radicalization policies at companies like Facebook and Twitter, as well as voice chat forum apps like Discord, stemmed from backlash from the discovery of recruitment networks on these websites. As of early 2018, Twitter alone had discovered and banned over one million accounts associated with terrorist groups, but in their place, right-wing radicalization has risen, allowed mostly unfettered activity due to the differing subject matter (Reisinger). While jihadi groups' social media influence is on the decline, they were once incredibly successful, particularly at the height of ISIS's power, and exploring the factors behind their success is key to understanding the appeal of domestic radicalization networks.

A key through line between jihadi and right-wing conspiratorial radicalization is their capitalization on feelings of aggrievement among potential targets. Laura Huey, a professor at the University of Western Ontario's Department of Sociology, analyzed this effect in reference to the "jihadi cool" strategy, "the rebranding of Jihadist forms of terrorism into an appealingly

‘hip’ subculture through the use of social media” (Huey 1). A scholar focused primarily on researching methods of combatting violent extremism, Huey finds that Twitter plays a particularly critical role in this tactic, linking its young audience’s “desire to be seen as cool and edgy among their peers” to jihadi recruitment success (Huey 4).

Through her study, originally intended to analyze the role of gender in social media radicalization, Huey found that traditional radicalization tactics were employed by jihadi recruiters, intensified by the high accessibility of social media. Many memes disseminated by recruiters focused on a hatred of US foreign policy, particularly drone programs, and directed that hatred towards specific US leaders, such as President Obama. This tactic seeks to give radicalized individuals specific targets for violence and allows for so-called “lone wolf” attacks in instances where the target resides outside of the terrorist network’s territorial domain. This tactic of weaponizing hatred of specific political leaders is the first aspect that clearly carries over to US radicalization, often with the exact same individuals.

Your Enemies Must Be Criminals

Practically every right-wing conspiracy, whether #Pizzagate, the various anti-Clinton conspiracies, or QAnon, focuses heavily on alleged crimes by prominent liberals and Democrats, seemingly growing in scope and heinousness with each new theory. From #Pizzagate, a conspiracy in which a DC pizza restaurant hosted a Clinton-run basement child sex ring in the basement, real violence occurred. Seeking to “investigate” these allegations, Edgar Welch entered Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria with an AR-15 and fired several shots, fortunately not hitting any patrons (Johnson 100). Having this specific target, a pizza parlor with a known location, was no accident, extremism is particularly potent when given a target.

Jessica Johnson, a professor with the Anthropology Department of the University of Washington who focuses on critical media studies, views this trend through the lens of actor-network theory, where “paranoia [acts] as a networking process” (Johnson 102). Actor-network theory, as discussed by Johnson, is apt for social media, as the theory posits that these communities are created between people that would otherwise have no real-world interactions. In these communities, the lack of personal connection to their conspiratorial brethren is assuaged by their shared hatred of individuals that exist outside of their political ideologies. This has rarely been more prominent than in the QAnon conspiracy, which has dominated political news in light of the pipe bomb mailings of recent weeks. Regarding Cesar Sayok, the suspected bomber, KFile, an internet investigative team for CNN, found that while his actions were certainly abnormal, *his* “social media accounts read like a blueprint for the radicalization of an alleged domestic terrorist” and align with those of thousands of other Americans, including many in the QAnon community (Kaczynski et al.).

The history of this conspiracy, and resulting online communities, illustrates near-perfectly the trajectory of modern right-wing conspiracies and demonstrates how social media, and particularly Twitter, is a key facilitator of their growth. Will Sommer, a reporter for *The Daily Beast* who has been deeply entrenched in the QAnon theory since its beginnings in 2017, describes the theory as a belief that “every president before Trump was a ‘criminal president’ in league with all the nefarious groups of conspiracy theories past” (Sommer). The QAnon conspiracy, by effectively combing aspects of previous popular right-wing conspiracy theories, bypassed typically essential phases of recruitment, but the signs were still there. I recall, on one of my several ventures into right-wing hashtags on Twitter, how after the #Pizzagate shooting happened, usernames and tweets steadily coalesced under the QAnon banner. Fundamentally, the

members of these communities are seeking exactly that community which actor-network theory would posit they provide, and so they gravitate to the latest conspiracy with haste. Johnson attests to this, stating, “users find the affective pleasure of connectivity addictive, whether or not the information they share is factual” (Johnson 110).

Reject the Evidence of Your Eyes

One of the most curious aspects of these groups for me, as I browsed their networks, was how they appeared so adaptive to any real-world events. Whether or not actual news followed their conspiracy, everything is treated as further proof. Here, Twitter, which has been repeatedly attacked for its bubble-creating following method, facilitates radicalization, as followers are increasingly isolated to only those who share their views. Following the actor-network theory, in seeking these communities, these right-wing groups are also seeking charismatic leaders, which they find in both social media and real life. Despite the fact that the anonymous poster behind the QAnon theory was exposed by NBC reporters to be three grifters who were profiting off the theory, the mythology, which states that Q is a high-level military figure, has only grown (Zadrozny and Collins). On Twitter, meanwhile, celebrities like Curt Schilling and Roseanne Barr have endorsed the theory, lending it further credence among these groups.

This sense of reality belonging only to those one follows on social media has been stoked by prominent right-wing figures, even President Trump himself. As Ross and Rivers, two professors of critical discourse, found in their study of President Trump’s tweets, Trump prefers to “position himself as the only reliable source of truthful information” (Ross and Rivers 1). This has fostered a systematic disbelief in any news other than Trump-aligned sources, leading these users to turn to radicalized groups. Further, Trump has actively collaborated with prominent creators and disseminators of these theories, such as Alex Jones. As Johnson notes, “Trump and

[Alex] Jones use social media to stoke and spread conspiracy theories that thrive and capitalize on the agency panic of white men” (Johnson).

The internet, and particularly Twitter and other forum-style platforms, play host for many personalities, and sites with anti-radicalization policies can find it difficult to distinguish between them. Most notably, internet provocateurs who write offensive posts to elicit reactions from the opposition and radicalizing figures intending to foment violent sentiments often use similar tactics, particularly given the heavy anti-left sentiments found at the origins of right-wing radicalization. However, the necessary isolation of “trolling” provocateurs sets them apart from radicalized communities, of which QAnon is once again a key example. Q, the anonymous poster at the heart of the conspiracy, never engages with liberals directly, instead directing the anger of QAnon followers towards the left. These conspiracies are sustained by outrage about left-wing ideas, and left-wing figures when possible, and Twitter’s nature provides a near-constant supply. Short-form messages, necessitated by Twitter’s character limit, allow opposition views to be easily truncated and taken out of context, further ingraining the conspiracy spreaders as the sole disseminators of true information. In the QAnon conspiracy in particular, posts by Q also use the format to the conspiracy’s benefit. In a recent tweet, for example, QAnon believer “Sean Not Shawn” becomes convinced of Q’s prescience by comparing a Trump’s tweet, where he uses his oft-repeated phrase “Enemy of the People,” to a Q post with the same phrasing (Shawn). This vague familiarity capitalizes on recognizability to convince users to engage with deeper layers of the conspiracy.

Political Jamming

In Huey’s evaluation of jihadi recruitment, she coins the term “political jamming” to describe how terrorist groups utilize “subversive, satirical activity that draws on humor to

reinforce ideological messages” (Huey). Essentially, as we understand it in an American-sense, radicalizing figures capitalize on pre-existing memes to captivate viewers and entice them into reading further. Understanding what cultural zeitgeists radicalization-prone populations subscribe to is key to learning how these radicalization schemes spread, and with the meme-heavy forums surrounding right-wing conspiracies, it becomes clear that the creation of these communities wasn’t at all accidental. With leaders like President Trump “[operating] as a serial spreader of mis- and disinformation,” even going so far as to spread memes found on conspiratorial threads, like that of him body slamming an anthropomorphized CNN, followers easily understand the cultural meaning. (Ross and Rivers 1). From Pepe the Frog to the new Alex Jones-created “NPC Meme,” right-wing theories almost entirely exist as variations of memes, proving their followers with both their “news” and entertainment, further isolating them from the world outside of these conspiracies. Twitter, with its reliance on these forms of media due to the character limit, has proven itself to be an excellent proving ground for potentially violent conspiracies.

Systemic Difficulties

Ideally, a fact-check function would act as a catch-all policy for disinformation campaigns, and in the aftermath of the 2016 election, when neither Facebook nor Twitter had such a feature, critics focused on fact-checking as a critical reform. While Twitter didn’t acquiesce to the demands, Facebook employed several non-partisan fact-checking and news websites, including *The Associated Press* and *Snopes*, and introduced a system that would display warnings on disputed content. Since then, Twitter has faced condemnation for its lack of accountability for the factuality of posts on its platform and for the perverse incentive to invent sensational stories for increased virality. Senator Susan Collins complained that Twitter allowed a Russian propaganda account onto her Twitter feed, propaganda so widespread that Twitter

ultimately issued an alert to every account that had interacted with this and similar accounts (Kang et al.). A fact-checking system therefore seems a natural deterrent to such content, but Facebook's service has faced even harsher criticisms, particularly in its inability to stop the spread of right-wing conspiracy theory communities.

Facebook launched the program in 2017, but the service has faced wide criticism for its lack of usefulness. Facebook has not released official data on the impact of its fact-checks, but initial third-party reports suggest that posts flagged as "disputed" are only about 4% less likely to be believed than the same post without a label (Christian). In regard to radicalization-prone users, it merely serves as an opportunity for leaders to once again assert their opposition to the hated "Mainstream Media" and cement their reputation as a lonely truth-teller. Actor James Woods, a major promoter of a litany of right-wing conspiracies wrote on Twitter that a Facebook dispute is "best endorsement a story could have" (Woods). Further, Walter Quattrociocchi, a political scientist researching online interactions, found that among highly polarized users, defined by a 95% interaction rate with a single conspiracy narrative, "debunking might sound [...] like something dissenting from their narrative" (Zollo et al. 5). Across social media, Quattrociocchi notes that "out of 9,790,906 polarized conspiracy users, just 117,736 interacted with debunking posts" (Zollo et al. 6). Fact-checking may assuage ethical concerns at social media companies but fails to sufficiently address the threat of violence fomented by radical right-wing communities.

Twitter's Failings

Nevertheless, none of this would be possible if Twitter had imposed more stringent rules governing radicalization on its platform. Despite their supposed attempts to root out terroristic users, many banned users are simply free to return to the platform under a new username and

continue undeterred. Additionally, despite Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, promising to crack down on “hate symbols, violent groups, and tweets that glorify violence,” entire conspiracy communities have gone completely untouched (Kosoff).

In some cases, Twitter has blatantly legitimized radical, and even violent figures. Several well-known white supremacist figures – organizer of the violent Unite the Right rally, Jason Kessler, for example – have received “verification,” outraging those who see the symbol as conveying legitimacy.

Contributing to these policy failures has been a potent and maintained effort by Congressional Republicans to ensure that right-wing voices have a place on platforms like Twitter. After concerns were raised by several conservative pundits that Twitter’s algorithm promotes liberal content over conservative posts, the House Energy and Commerce Committee called Dorsey to testify. As Dorsey spoke, far-right personality Laura Loomer, who had recently lost her verification and has since been banned from the site, protested outside. During his testimony, Dorsey remained neutral as Congressional Democrats and Republicans sparred over his appearance, a neutrality that was influenced by the heavy pressure of prominent political figures (Kang et al.). Punitive regulations punishing Twitter for allegations of algorithmic “shadow-banning” and downranking of conservative accounts could threaten the business. With senators like Democrat Mark Warner of Virginia stating that “the era of the Wild West in social media is coming to an end,” regulation is clearly coming, and Dorsey’s actions could influence whether that legislation goes beyond the scope of privacy into content moderation (Kang et al.). Without Congressional pressure to stem radical communities on Twitter, Dorsey’s business motives would necessitate small, careful policy changes.

Solutions

As Twitter's failures make clear, urgent action is needed on behalf of social media companies to stem these pernicious communities at their core. These sites, due to the loosely collected nature of the theories' followers, are often the only gathering place for these radicalizing influences. Twitter has policies in place in countries like Germany, where expressions of Nazism and white supremacy are forbidden, that allow it to sort out many of these Tweets, but some, like QAnon, likely wouldn't qualify under those categories. Therefore, more targeted moderation of Twitter's platform would be required, and to Twitter's credit, they have recently begun banning significant voices in the conspiratorial community. While some argued at the time that "deplatforming" would fail to silence these figures, Milo Yiannopolous, one of the first banned by Twitter, recently conceded that "two years of being no-platformed, banned, blacklisted and censored...has taken its toll," resulting in extreme debt and a diminished following (Beauchamp). This, paired with now-banned conspiracy theorist Laura Loomer's protests at Twitter HQ, demonstrate the new banning policy's successes and suggest that it should be expanded. However, with conservative scrutiny already on Twitter for their alleged discrimination against conservative users, this seems unlikely in the near future.

Instead, what may be required is an overhaul of Twitter's system of following, as Huey's study found that the most effective responses to radicalization campaigns were the further co-opting of memes, using them for purposes of deradicalization. Rather than attempting to simply convince these users that their ideas are incorrect, attacking these radical ideas at their persuasive roots can do the heavy work of slowing the spread of extremism. Given Quattrociocchi's research on the efficacy of fact-checking, Twitter can dispute that cross-community communication would be an effective method of deradicalization. However, Quattrociocchi's research was specific to posts by fact-checking and scientific accounts, and recent research by

Drew Margolin, who studied fact-checking on Twitter, finds that interpersonal interactions can be significantly more effective. Margolin analyzed thousands of Tweets and found that in many cases, “individuals learn the norms of their group via admonitions from other group members,” and that direct confrontation from a friend or acquaintance can contribute significantly to deradicalization (Margolin et al. 201). Cross-community communication would, in many cases, reduce the community appeal of these conspiracies and would provide the radicalization-prone more outlets for deradicalization.

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