How Does Right-Wing Radicalisation Take Place Online?

NATASHA PRENTICE connects the algorithms that shape our social media experiences with the growing trend of right-wing extremism.

In 2018, right-wing radicalisation overtook Islamist extremism to become the most common referral to the Prevent Anti-Terror programme in the UK (The Home Office 2019). Since 2016, four far-right groups were also added to the United Kingdom government's list of prescribed terrorist organisations: National Action, Sonnenkrieg Division, Attomwaffen Division, and The Base (Proscribed Terrorist Groups or Organisations 2021). Over the past decade in the United States, 75 percent of the domestic extremist-related killings have been attributed to the extreme right (The Anti-Defamation League 2021). Neil Basu (2021) points out that this can partially be attributed to the fact that individuals are increasingly radicalised online and through social media.

This paper will be split into three sections. The first section discusses filter bubbles and their role in the radicalisation process, using YouTube as a case study. The second section focuses on the website 4chan, exploring the role that anonymity plays in radicalisation. The final section discusses potential solutions for online radicalisation and explores who is responsible for stopping the spread of these ideologies. This article argues that filter bubbles and anonymity limit our agency online, leading to an increased risk of radicalisation.

The extreme right will be understood as a broad ideology, with both reactionary and revolutionary justifications for violence. They are exclusionist and favour hierarchy, seeking an 'idealised future that favours a specific group' (National Consortium for the Study of and Response to Terrorism 2018).

Often this group is white, male, Christian, or in other ways representing a historically powerful demographic. I will follow Youngblood's (2020, 2) definition of radicalisation as 'a process in which individuals are destabilised over time by several environmental factors, exposed to extremist ideology, and subsequently reinforced by members of their community.' Increasingly, and in the case of this article, that community is online.

Part I: Filter Bubbles

The term 'filter bubble' is widely traced back to Eli Pariser's 2011 book The Filter Bubble: What The Internet Is Hiding From You. The book opens with an anecdote about the British Petroleum oil spill, when Pariser asked two of his friends to search 'BP' online. One saw updates on the oil spill, the other saw investment advertisements for the company. He goes on to theorise that this is due to the algorithmic personalisation used by search engines (Pariser 2011). The filter bubble is not curated directly by the user; rather it is the algorithmically produced result of data from their searches, likes, and comments (Sumpter 2018). In the context of radicalisation, this means that users who stumble upon radical content will automatically see similar content that reinforces radical beliefs (Wolfowicz, Weisburd and Hasisi, 2021). This content pipeline can lead to a 'digital drift' towards crime and radicalisation (Goldsmith and Brewer 2015). However, while there is some evidence suggesting that explicitly searching for radical content on some platforms will lead to similar content being suggested, this is not the case
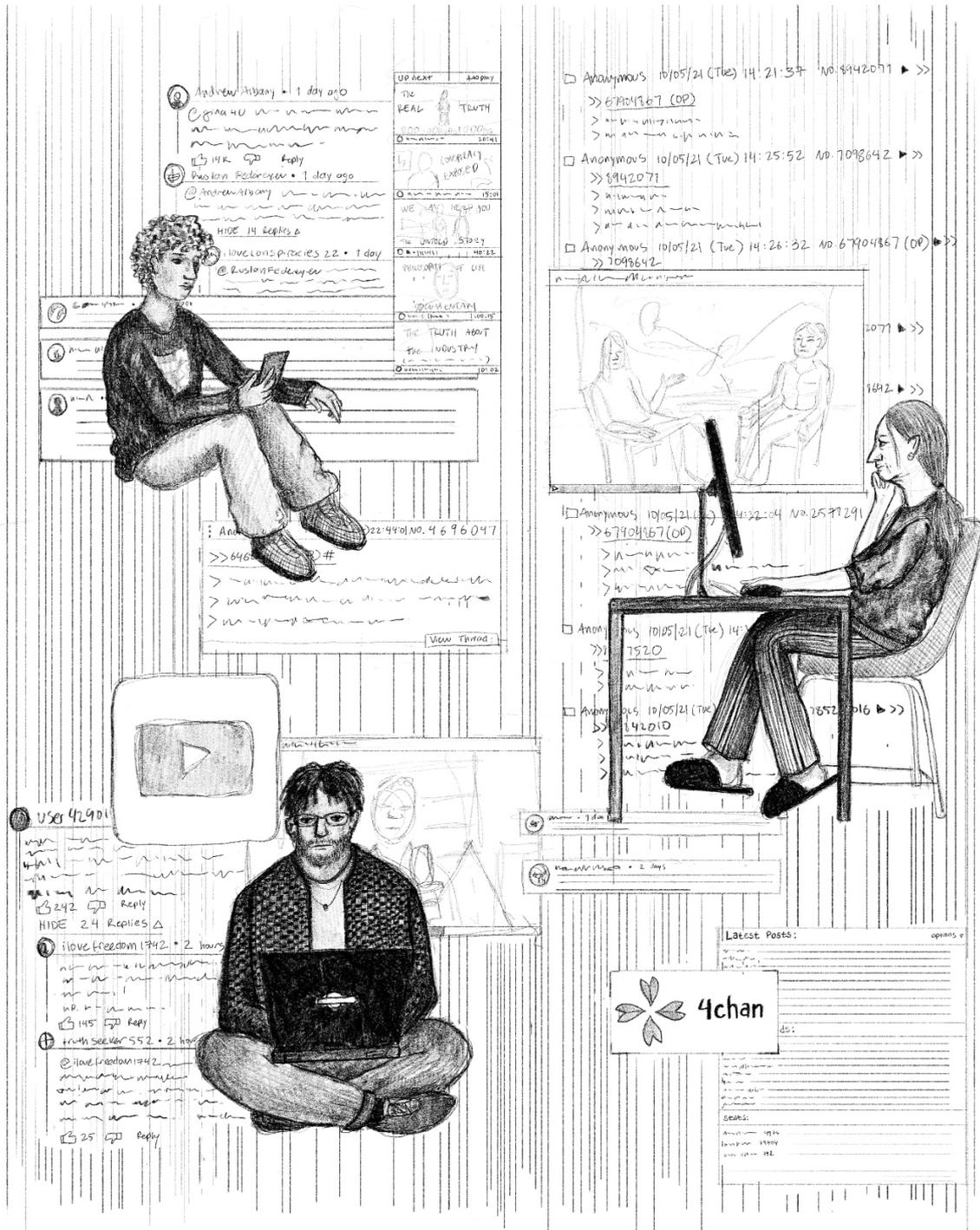
for all platforms (Whittaker et al. 2021).

The YouTube algorithm gained mainstream media attention when The New York Times published an interview with YouTube's chief product officer Neal Mohan, in which he denied YouTube having any interest in promoting extremist content and argued that balancing free speech with user safety was difficult on such a vast site (Roose 2019). YouTube is the second most visited site on the internet, with two billion users a month. One study of over 80,000 people showed that 27 percent used YouTube for news (Newman et al. 2020). The

algorithm has learnt over time what content will keep people engaged, and in some cases, this leads it to recommend extreme content (Bryant 2020).

While it may not be YouTube's intention to promote radical content, the algorithm's design has an impact: many far-right extremists cite YouTube recommendations as having played a key role in their radicalisation (Bryant 2020). A recent study aimed to examine whether users systematically gravitated toward more extreme content and if the algorithm was contributing to this drive (Ribeiro et al. 2019). The study examined three communities:

the 'intellectual dark web' (IDW)—academics and media personalities who often discuss controversial topics; the 'Alt-lite'—right-wing individuals who differentiate themselves from the alt-right through their commitment to civic-nationalism; and the alt-right. The study found that the groups of users commenting on these videos overlapped, as users who initially only commented on milder (less extreme) videos migrated to more extreme content over time. When a manual check of 900 random comments was carried out (300 from each community), only five were identified as criticism of the videos. This uncritical exposure reveals some level of radicalisation due to the platform.

The study showed that YouTube frequently suggests IDW content and alt-lite content. Furthermore, while the simulation did not show any alt-right video recommendations, it did suggest alt-right channels. The analysis of YouTube recommendations did not account for personalisation, revealing a default pathway to extremist content (Ribeiro et al. 2019). While this study does not definitively prove that YouTube's algorithm causes far-right radicalisation, it does show a concerning pattern. Combining data from actual users and tracking their comments over time, does show a trend of radicalisation; this, paired with the simulations, shows that there is a pathway to extreme content on the site.

Part II: 4chan – Anonymity

4chan is an anonymous image board which was initially created in 2003 for the purpose of sharing Japanese culture and anime (Dewey 2014). Since its creation, it has become known for transgressive humour and minimal moderation. Users are anonymous by default and threads are presented in order of most popular to least popular. One of the most prominent boards is '/pol/' or 'politically incorrect'. On /pol/ there is a strong consensus towards extreme right-wing ideology such as white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and misogyny—

the far-right is seen as the only credible source of information and trust in mainstream media is extremely low to non-existent (Elley 2021).

Anonymity is central to 4chan, especially on boards such as /pol/ where users post extreme content. The anonymity provided by 4chan can be described as 'approved anonymity' (following Horsman 2016)—and while users are anonymous to one another, if they post illegal content, the site will disclose their IP to the police and ban the user.

Anonymity can give users a false sense of agency; when they adopt a group ideology and believe they are part of a community, they may be emboldened to act. In the context of right-wing radicalisation, this could lead to aggression both on and offline. Protection through anonymity leads to disinhibition, deindividuation (a loss of sense of self and social norms), and depersonalisation (Reagle 2015). This often manifests through online aggression, taking the form of 'raids' on other sites or bullying other users (Sparby 2017). Anonymity also plays a role in the far-right rhetoric of 4chan, especially on /pol/. Users feel they do not need to conform to social norms such as political correctness (which is the explicit purpose of /pol/). Furthermore, depersonalisation may lead people to adopt the group ideology as their own. Other users cannot trace posts back to their offline identity, so users are free to discuss ideas of white supremacy, ethno-states, and outright Nazism freely (Elley 2021).

The anonymity of 4chan also poses issues for those wishing to study it, as no credible demographic studies exist. While 4chan claims that the site is 70 percent male, mostly aged between eighteen to 34 with a college education, this cannot be confirmed (4chan 2021). Other than anonymity, another potential pitfall of studying 4chan is the culture of satire, which makes it difficult to determine the users' true beliefs. While the studies cited are robust and appear to understand this, any academic attempt to analyse 4chan and draw solid conclusions is prone to this pitfall.

Part III: Potential Solutions and Conclusion

Online radicalisation is a prominent issue in the age of the internet, with some arguing that social media companies do not take enough responsibility for the content on their platforms (Basu 2021), while others propose that individuals should take action to combat the far right. Moore and Roberts (2021), coming from an anarchist background with an emphasis on community and individual intervention as opposed to state measures, argue for a multi-pronged approach that includes 'de-platforming,' counter speech, and deradicalising individuals to re-radicalise them to left-wing ideology.

The first strategy they discuss—deplatforming—involves getting content removed from sites. They point out that social media sites are run for profit, and by threatening this profit (boycotting sites with extremist content), sites will remove extremist content (Moore and Roberts 2021, 200). The second approach they discuss is deradicalising and re-radicalising: they point out that social isolation makes people susceptible to far-right ideology and that individuals should recognise susceptible people, making interventions early on if possible. They see deradicalisation as a form of treatment that is supplemented later with re-radicalisation, which pushes users towards leftism (Moore and Roberts 2021, 196). Another tool they promote is the idea of counterspeech: going into far-right spaces online and posting leftist content (Moore and Roberts 2021, 201). They highlight an example in Twitter's recent update that prompts users to rethink their slur-filled posts (Moore and Roberts 2021). Moore and Roberts pose interesting ideas which, if implemented in conjunction with technological solutions, could have a significant impact on online radicalisation. However, these ideas would need to be implemented en masse, which might prove difficult.

A more centralised approach to preventing right-wing radicalisation online is another option. Alfano et al. (2018) suggest that to understand and combat radicalisation online, we must distinguish the different types of 'technological seduction' that lead to it. The authors define 'top-down seduction' as website design that nudges the user into certain actions by convincing the user that the site structure mirrors the user's thought process when navigating the choice architecture of the site (Alfano et al. 2018). 'Bottom-up seduction,' in contrast, uses location and data—both from the user and from users classed as similar to them—to personalise results. YouTube is therefore an example of successful bottom-up seduction (Alfonso et al. 2018).

For top-down seduction, Alfano et al. (2018) recommend guidelines for news websites that focus on functionality. They point to the standards set out by the International Organization for Standardization, where compliance is voluntary, but the benefits of compliance make it advisable for users to comply (Alano et al. 2018). With regards to bottom-up seduction, they point to the imposition of a 'time out period for users to reduce path dependence and make users who search radical content reflect on this (Alfano et al. 2018, 305). For example, YouTube now directs users that search ISIS content to videos that question their methods (Holley 2017). However, while these adaptations are simple for large, well-funded companies to implement, smaller companies may struggle. Alfano et al. (2018) suggest tax-funded, open-source algorithms that reflect best practices as one way to help smaller companies and ensure compliance. Both of these solutions aim to give the user the tools to regain their agency that has been diluted through seduction.

While the concept of different types of seduction which lead people to radicalisation is useful, the suggested solutions are questionable. Large companies such as Facebook can struggle to ensure users comply with their terms of service and ensuring compliance on the whole internet seems like an impossible task, especially when many sites are likely to resist. Furthermore, who would set these standards and values that would be built into the internet? Implementing these solutions would take a global effort and cooperation from all sides.

To conclude, both suggested solutions are extremely different from one another. While one offers a ground-up decentralised effort to regulate right-wing radicalisation on the internet, the other calls for a very centralised approach. Although both offer valuable insight and have useful elements, they both seem unrealistic for different reasons. This highlights that there is not one simple solution to the problem of online radicalisation. Due to this and the fact that an increasing number of people have access to the internet—especially in the aftermath of the pandemic—research into online radicalisation is shown to be of particular importance.

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