

Maybe it's not the Algorithm

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YouTube is one of the biggest social media platforms in the world. Alt-right channels dominate the political discussion on YouTube. A popular belief amongst political science researchers is that YouTube's recommendation algorithm is responsible for pushing people into a "rabbit hole" and radicalize them. A study by Penn State political scientists Kevin Munger and Joseph Phillips [*] challenges this narrative.

The authors say that this theory grew out of the media reports, and it isn't backed up by research. The narrative is popular because it has an obvious solution; a policy change by Google, YouTube's parent company. The authors suggest that people are getting radicalized by combining their prior beliefs with new information; this information is supplied to them by YouTube. The supply of right-wing political media has grown because it's straightforward and cheap to create video content, which is far more impactful than text. A lone fringe creator with a devoted audience can very quickly reach mainstream status in such an environment with minimum financial or personal capital.

If we look at the demand aspect of things the authors mention that the audience for such extreme political content already existed, the authors argue that studies have shown that over the years there has been a steady decline in people's trust in the government. The other factors, such as the decline in manufacturing jobs, which was the leading sector for employment for young white males who are likely to consume far-right content. Previous research has also shown that people who never consumed news in the written form are consuming it in a video form on YouTube.

To conclude, YouTube is an advantageous medium for fringe political actors to tap into an existing base of disillusioned individuals who are detached from the mainstream media.

* Munger, K., Phillips, J. (2019). A Supply and Demand Framework for YouTube Politics.