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Nothing Has Changed Since Yesterday, Why the Role of Social Media in Radicalization is more Complex than it Seems

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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Nothing Has Changed Since Yesterday

Why the Role of Social Media in Radicalization is More Complex than it Seems

Honors Thesis

Submitted

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By

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Abstract

Nothing Has changed Since Yesterday

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In recent years there has been a seeming resurgence of political radicalism such as the alt-right and openly socialist groups that have coalesced around former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. This sudden resurgence of radicalism has often been blamed on Social Media and its perceived ability to create echo chambers and help these groups organize. The goal of this paper is to refute the idea that social media is the sole cause of this recent wave of radicalism by building a framework of radicalization agnostic of social media, and then to explore how social media interacts with that framework. The paper then provides potential solutions for reforming social media platforms to minimize what role they do have in radicalization

Keywords: thesis, honors thesis, undergraduate research, radicalization, social media, Actor-Network Theory

Contents

Introduction

On August 12, 2017 the Unite the Right Rally was held in Charlottesville, Virginia. The rally was an explicitly white supremacist gathering that saw violent clashes between the attendees and anti-fascist groups gathered to protest the event, culminating in the death of anti-fascist protestor Heather Heyer after one of the alt-right attendees slammed his car into a group of protestors. In the immediate aftermath of the event the media turned its eyes on the suddenly mainstream alt-right and asked how a group of mostly young men this large had become inculcated with radical white supremacist and fascist ideology. While no complete consensus was found, a common perspective placed the blame on social media, especially on YouTube and its algorithmic content curation, which were accused of creating platforms that aided the spread of extremist ideologies while insulating users from opposing points of view. In much of the academic literature that investigated this informational model and found it to hold true, the blame for radicalization was placed almost solely on the structure of social media platforms like YouTube and on the consequences of their algorithmic content curation. Going into research for this thesis I held essentially that same view. However, it became apparent to me in the course of my research that radicalization cannot be solely blamed on some aspect of social media structure. The attitude that the modern radical movements, be they

the alt right or radical Islam or any other variety of extremist, can have their origins

blamed solely on the rise of the internet age and the birth of social media, is short sighted

at best and dangerously simple at worst. What became apparent to me is that social media

itself has no special property that radicalizes people directly, it is instead a catalyst that

accelerates a process of radicalization that is endemic to society at large.

  The academic literature on the topic of social media and its role in radicalization

is somewhat limited simply due to the relative nascency of social media as a technology.

The most expansive body of work is focused on the role of social media in recruitment

for Islamic terrorist organizations, and that work typically takes a very simple approach

of identifying recruitment techniques and identifying ways they might be countered by

law enforcement, intelligence, or military authorities. Little consideration is given to the

question of what leads to radicalization in these studies, instead they simply discuss the

most surface level examination of how radicals market themselves to potential radicals.

This isn't a useless study, as the tactics used by radicals to recruit new members play a

role in radicalization and are relevant to counter terrorism efforts, but it doesn't examine

how or why a person goes from "normal" to extremist, an oversight that I believe keeps

the tactics used to counter these recruitment attempts at a level that is weak, and will be

explained later, incapable of solving the problem in the long term. A smaller set of

literature is focused on white supremacists, and this literature does tend to ask how and

why an individual ends up part of these extremist movements, but as was mentioned

above there is a tendency to find an easy scapegoat in singular causes, typically social

media, though not always, but still fail to approach a wholistic answer. There is very little

literature covering left wing extremists, such as anarchists or communists, and most of it

is focused on the Occupy Wallstreet movement, which while certainly radical to some extent, pales in comparison to militant leftist groups. There is seemingly no meaningful literature on what causes radicalization in general, instead focusing on specific radical groups as discussed above. This thesis seeks to provide a more wholistic explanation of the causes of radicalization and to then explain how social media interacts with those causes to amplify and heighten them, speeding up the process.

Before beginning the main body of this paper, it is necessary to discuss a few concepts and terms that are important to understand. First among these is the concept of neutrality and the question of what radicalization, as a systemic process, is. An easy way to model radicalization might be to simply assume some politically neutral individual has some force act upon them that causes their radicalization. This is an overly simplistic and problematic model however. First, this hypothetical neutral person is just some subject that is acted upon by the world around them. This is unrealistic, real people are not inactive subjects, but rather agents capable of action and decision making. Second, the idea of a politically neutral individual is itself ridiculous, as the only such persons are infants and very young children who do not have a capacity to comprehend politics yet. While the process by which a child comes to possess some political leanings is certainly something worthy of study, it is not the aim of this this thesis, rather, this thesis is focused on how individuals who are at least adolescents, and as such likely have some concept of politics, come to hold political beliefs that are considered radical. It is possible for a child to be reared in such a way that they can be said to have always been radical politically, but that isn't the same as the process this paper interrogates, wherein someone shifts from one political alignment to another, ending up aligned with radical right or left

wing ideologies. This requires a person with some sort of politics, namely adolescents and adults. People at this stage in their lives are political actors in their own right and while they might lack a robust or nuanced understanding of politics, they have beliefs and can act on them. It is at this stage that radicalization as this paper intends to talk about it occurs.

The process of radicalization at this stage is then not one of forces acting upon a neutral subject, but rather an active subject acting upon the world and being acted upon in turn. Action can be understood in this context to be limited to ideologically motivated action, anything from the voicing of a political opinion to direct political action like a protest or demonstration, or even acts of violence in the name of an ideology. A reaction is simply an action made in response to the action of another person. The process of radicalization can then be said to be a complex chain of action and reaction, with each individual in a society acting upon one another as they come into contact with each other, with the end result that some individual shifts their political beliefs into the realm of what would be deemed radical. This of course raises the question of what is deemed radical in the first place. There is no set answer to this question, as it is based solely upon the norms of a given society. There was a time when women's suffrage or the emancipation of slavery would have been seen as radical, but in modern American society the very opposite is true. In other eras the concept of democracy, now a normal and respected part of political life, would have been radical in its own way. For these reasons it is necessary to define what is meant by "radical ideology." Within the American context, radical ideology refers mainly to white supremacists, religious extremists, communists, anarchists for the purposes of this paper, and for the sake of simplicity white

supremacists will be used as a primary example, though the model proposed in this paper is not specific to that particular ideology.

Another important concept to consider is that of "real life" and its supposed opposite, "online." This paper will at various points compare a process in "real life" to the same process "online" explaining how some element of the internet interacts with it. This is a shorthand meant to show the difference between a social interaction conducted face to face or in a physical place and one conducted on a social media platform. In reality the "online" world is as much a part of "real life" as any physical interaction could be, the divide between the two is simply a cultural construct born from the idea that the internet is somehow a space separate from the world at large. This is sort of mysticism around the internet in my opinion, complicates any discussion of the internet and how it has impacted society since it came to prominence. That said, what divide actually does exist between the two, namely the difference in how social interaction occurs in the two, is relevant to this particular topic, though even that line becomes hazier when one considers that "real life" political action can and often does lead to "online" action and vice versa. The actual interplay of the two spaces, in so far as they are distinct, is a topic too complex to cover in much depth in this paper.

A final piece of terminology to be considered is that of "inculcation." In this paper I will use the term "inculcate" to refer to any instance in which a person adopts the view point of another. This is meant to avoid the misuse of the word "radicalize" when discussing shifts in ideology, as not all such shifts will result in a person becoming radicalized. It is also meant to illustrate the social nature of radicalization. Most ideas and knowledge do not spring fully formed from the ether into our heads, instead they come to

us from other people, most often direct social interaction or through media like books or film. Even new ideas are dependent upon prior knowledge to some extent, typically by following an idea to its logical conclusion, or identifying some flaw in an ideology and attempting to work out a solution. It can therefore be argued that most ideology is gained either in part or in whole via inculcation from another person either directly, in a social interaction, or indirectly, through some media produced by that person. In this way it can be said that ideology changed through inculcation of new information.

Finally, before reaching the body proper, an important tool of analysis must be discussed. This is Actor-Network Theory. Actor-Network Theory is a framework for modeling social interaction that imagines actors within system as nodes connected through their actions upon one another. Actor-Network Theory allows for anything, not just people, to be considered actors. This allows for a model that considers not just how individuals act upon one another, such as they might on a social media platform, but how the platform itself can be understood to act on each person using it. Obviously an accurate Actor-Network for a platform like Facebook would be enormous, comprising of literally millions of actors to represent each user, but a simplified network with fewer actors can be used to illustrate the sort of social interactions that occur on Facebook each day and how the platform itself can accelerate the rate at which interactions that lead to inculcation of new ideas and/or radicalization of users.
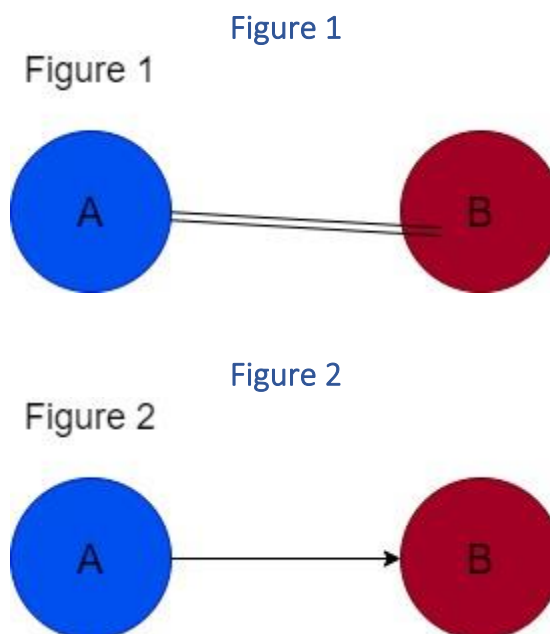
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 1, above, illustrates one of the simplest possible Actor-Network, Actor A and Actor B. The double line connecting the two demonstrates that they are acting upon one another equally. Actor A and Actor B could be any two people discussing some issue between themselves, each influencing the other more or less equally. Figure 2 illustrates another simple Actor-Network, again with only two Actors, Actor A and Actor B. The arrow illustrates that Actor A is acting upon Actor B, while Actor B does not act upon Actor A. Think of this as an interaction between a radio host and his audience. Actor A is the host whose words act upon the audience, while the audience is a passive listener with no real influence on the host. If the host expresses a political position, that expression is an act upon the audience, and while they can react in a myriad of ways, they cannot do anything in their capacity as a passive listener to equal the host's action. More complex diagrams will be used to explore other forms of social interaction later.

Factors of Radicalization

Moving now to the main body of this paper, the structure shall be as follows; first there will be a discussion of what social factors lead to an individual becoming radicalized. In short, this will cover various social phenomena that play some part in the process of radicalization. Second, aspects of social media networks will be examined with the intent to define how they accelerate or amplify the effect of the social interactions discussed earlier. Finally, this paper will examine solutions attempted by social media platforms to combat the radicalizing factors they enable, as well as present new solutions that might succeed where others have failed.

First and foremost, among the different social factors that contribute to radicalization is recruitment. Recruitment in this context is meant to refer not just to active attempts to convince someone to join a specific group, but also to any attempt to convince an individual of some idea. Obviously not every interaction that involves an attempt to convince someone of some idea is an attempt to radicalize that person, but it is important to remember that radicals have an agency of their own and that they have an active interest in turning people to their own point of view. They may do so through any rhetorical means and there is no guarantee of success, someone may just as easily reject a radical idea as accept it, but this should be recognized as the chief event through which radicalization can occur. Typically attempts at recruitment will exploit factors inherent to society or environment an individual inhabits. Perhaps the most famous instance of this is the employment of anti-immigrant rhetoric wielded to bring the poor and impoverished over to the side of white supremacists, arguing that the incoming immigrants will threaten the jobs and personal safety of those targeted for recruitment. Especially in a bad

economy, a moderate person who feels threatened in some way, perhaps fearing the loss

of his job or a supposed rise in crime in his neighborhood, could come to be swayed by

the racist rhetoric of a white supremacist. While that might not make the person in

question an out and out Nazi, it would represent a shift toward the radical white

supremacist school of thought and given enough time and enough exposure to that

rhetoric, he may come to accept their school of thought fully, especially if the media he

prefers already leans toward anti-immigrant politics. It may not be as outwardly racist or

extreme, but if a right of center news source were to continually raise fears about

immigration while a white supremacist continued to push the more extreme rhetoric, the

person in question might begin to see the extreme rhetoric as a logical conclusion of the

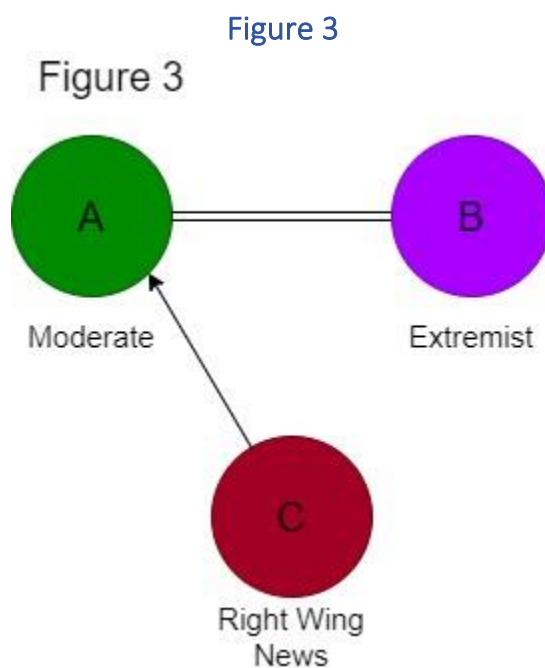more moderate anti-immigrant stance.

Figure 3

Figure 3

Figure 3 demonstrates an Actor-Network of the interaction discussed above. The

Moderate and the Extremist, represented by Actor A and Actor B respectively, act upon

one another more or less equally. There is no way to predict how one might affect the

other in the long term, they may simply randomly inculcate one another with a series of

ideas without meaningful shifts in position. But with the inclusion of the right-wing news

media represented by Actor C, which acts upon the Moderate without the Moderate

acting upon it, the situation is unbalanced. The Moderate individuals now has multiple

actors pressing him in the same ideological direction, one of which is a news outlet with

at least some measure of prestige and authority attributed to it by the Moderate. This

unbalanced network presents a higher chance of radicalization of the moderate actor than

a more balanced network like Figure 1.

Figure 4

Figure 4

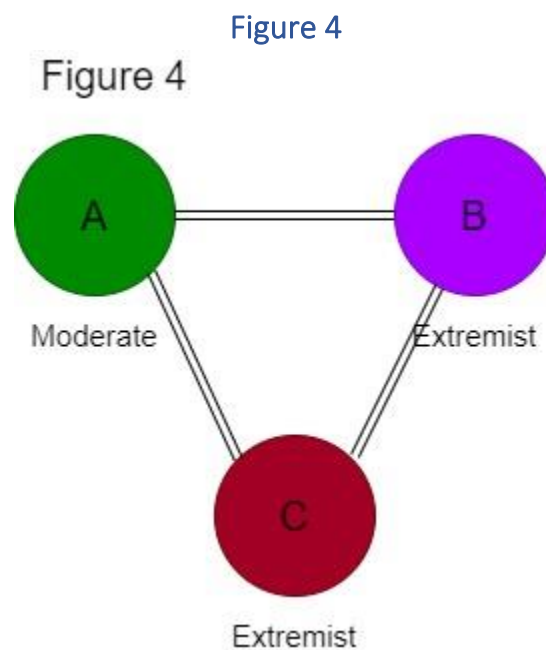Figure 4 illustrates a similar case to Figure 3, only in this instance we see that the

Moderate (Actor A) is being acted upon by two Extremists (Actor B and Actor C). The

Moderate is also acting upon the two Extremists, while the Extremists are acting upon

one another. This Actor-Network may appear more or less "balanced," each Actor acting

upon the other, but if we assume that the two Extremists belong to the same radical

ideology, it stands to reason that their actions upon one another will have no meaningful

impact upon their ideology, as they believe essentially the same thing. Because of this,

Figure 4 is very similar to Figure 3 in its overall effect. The Moderate is alone, being

acted upon by two ideologically similar actors. Because the Extremists are a united front,

the chances of the Moderate's actions upon inculcating them with more moderate

ideology are lessened, while the chances of their actions inculcating the moderate with

extreme ideas are increased.

Figure 5

Figure 5

A
Moderate
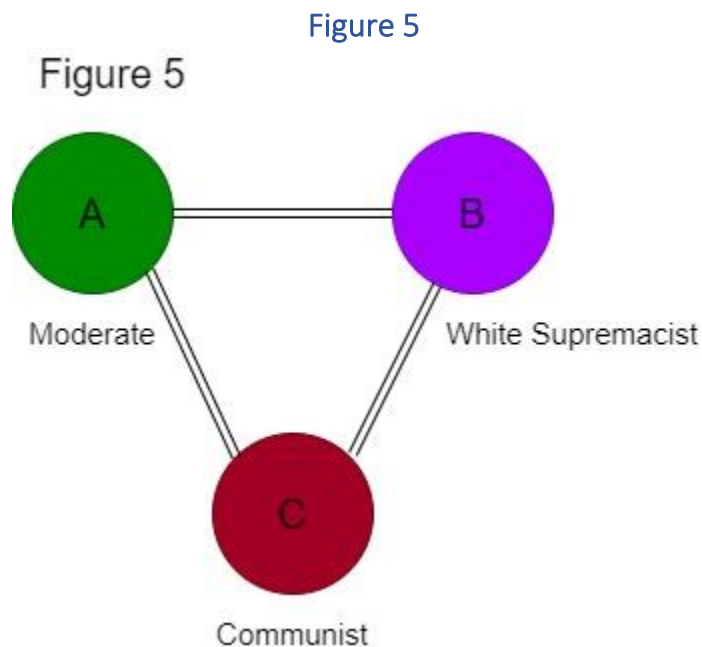
B
White Supremacist

C
Communist

Figure 5 is again similar to Figure 3 and Figure 4, only now we have two different

types of radicals, a White Supremacist (Actor B) and a Communist (Actor C). Because

the two are of different radical ideologies, their actions upon one another are not nullified

as actions of the two ideologically similar Extremists in Figure 4's actions were. The

Communist and White Supremacist act upon one another as much as they act upon the

Moderate. This model may have a sort of equilibrium, wherein the three Actors cannot

meaningfully inculcate one another in a way that results in meaningful change, but it may

also result in another kind of unbalance. Consider for a moment, a possibility brought up earlier, that the Moderate may harbor some sort of racist belief that makes him susceptible to white supremacist recruitment. Now consider also that that same Moderate, having been born and raised in the United States, may also harbor an inherent distrust of communism as an ideology. Because of this, this moderate especially unsusceptible to communist ideology. In that instance, Figure 5 may be more accurately represented by Figure 5.a.
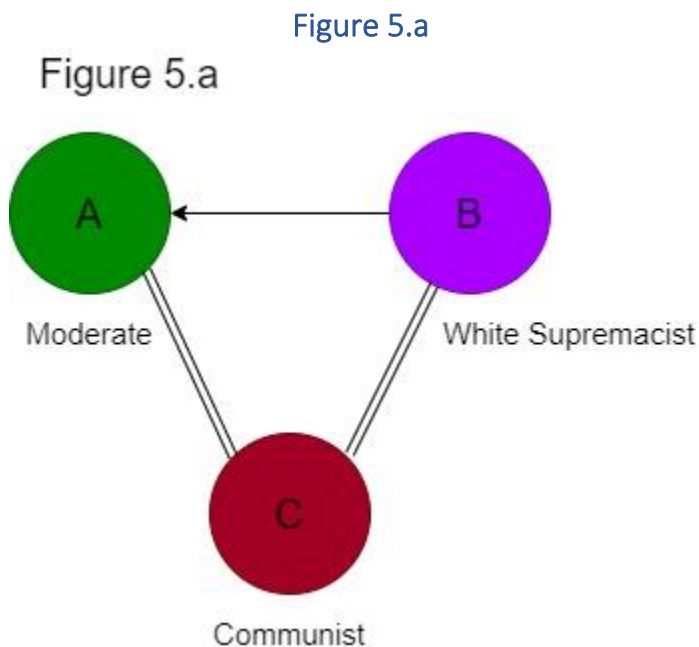
Figure 5.a

In figure 5.a we see that the equilibrium of Figure 5 is broken, the Moderate is no longer acting upon the White Supremacist, to whom the Moderate favors, and is instead only acting upon the Communist, to whom the Moderate is disfavors. This leaves the communist outnumbered, with two Actors acting against it. This could lead to the communist being inculcated with either moderate or white supremacist ideas and shifting ideologically, but that's not the interaction I hope to highlight. Rather, with the Moderate doing nothing to oppose the White Supremacist, he is now even more susceptible to

inculcation with White Supremacist ideology. Minor predispositions towards the two opposing types of radicals has made the presence of both a boon to the White Supremacist, who can exploit the disfavor for the communist to more easily recruit the Moderate, inculcating him with further extreme ideas using the obvious presence of the Communist as an argument for why such beliefs are justified. In this way extremists can aid an opposing extremist ideology even when actively attempting to oppose it. Figure 5.a also shows that labels like "Moderate" can be deceiving, even if they accurately represent an individual's political leanings, as a moderate can still have a slight lean toward the left or right of political ideology that could lead them to pick one extremist over another when confronted with two radical ideologies.

Figures 3 through 5.a represent a small selection of Actor-Network models of potential recruitment scenarios among potentially infinite permutations. The goal of these models is to both to illustrate some basic dynamics of recruitment as a social phenomenon and illustrate some basic mechanics of the Actor-Network as it is being used here. The next section of this paper will reexamine the examples considered above in a context where they are occurring in an online space. For the purposes of modeling these, it will be assumed that the actors are using multiple social media platforms in their daily lives. Social media platforms will be abstracted to some extent, with their different elements, such as a content curation algorithm, being represented as separate actors from other elements of the site, such as content creators. While any social network could itself be displayed as a single actor, splitting each network into elements that are each treated as actors will allow for the a more nuanced examination of how exactly the many moving parts of these enormous platforms impact the process of radicalization.

Impact of Social Media on Radicalization

To begin, consider Figure 3 in the previous section. In Figure 3 it can be seen that

an extremist and a news network are acting upon a moderate, weighing the odds in the

favor of radicalization. Now consider Figure 6 below.
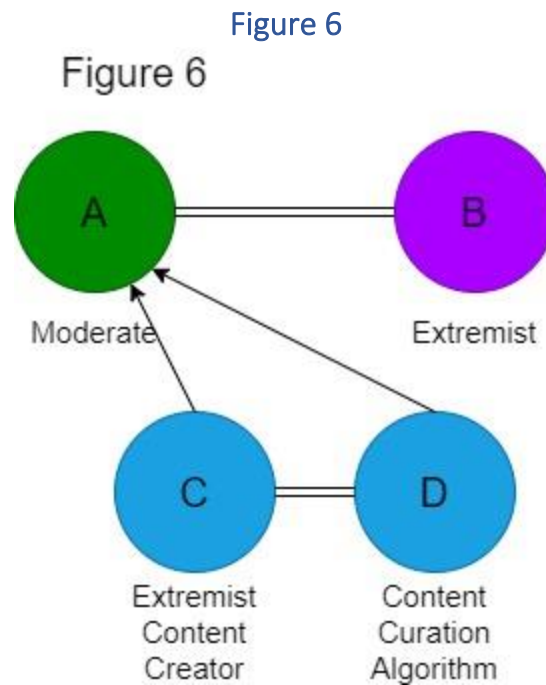
Figure 6

Figure 6 represents a modified version of Figure 3, showing a Moderate (Actor A)

being acted upon by an Extremist (Actor B), and instead of a traditional news source, an

extremist content creator on some platform, and the content curation algorithm of that

platform (Actors C and D, both colored blue to show that they are interrelated). On its

face this is already an unbalanced model, with even more Actors acting against the

Moderate than before, but an important element of this new model is the interplay of the

Content Creator and the Content Curation Algorithm. The Content Curation Algorithm

actively amplifies the Content Creator, showing the Moderate more and more of the

Content Creator's content as the Moderate consumes it. The algorithm is built to

encourage the Moderate to consume the creator's content again and again as this repetitive activity is a large part of how the social media platform makes it money. The algorithm then goes a step further, recommending not just the one content creator, but any content creator that the algorithm deems similar enough to potentially grab the Moderate's interest. In this case, the most similar creators will likely be other extremists with content pushing their extreme beliefs. This is shown in Figure 7, where several overlapping actors represent multiple content creators. Their collective actions upon the Moderate are amplified by the algorithm's continual act of recommending these content creators to the Moderate. The chances of the Moderate to consume this content increases with time, and if the content is consumed, it represents a potential inculcation. When combined with the further influence of an Extremist actively engaging the Moderate, the odds of inculcation and eventual radicalization increase tremendously as the weight of radical ideology bears down upon the Moderate. Now of course it is possible that the Moderate will reject this ideology, stop listening to the content creators, and stop speaking to the extremist, but the model in Figure 7 assumes that the Moderate isn't in an active opposition to these ideologies, but rather is exposed to them while viewing the content in question for entertainment purposes and while having more or less normal exchanges with the Extremist where politics are but one topic.
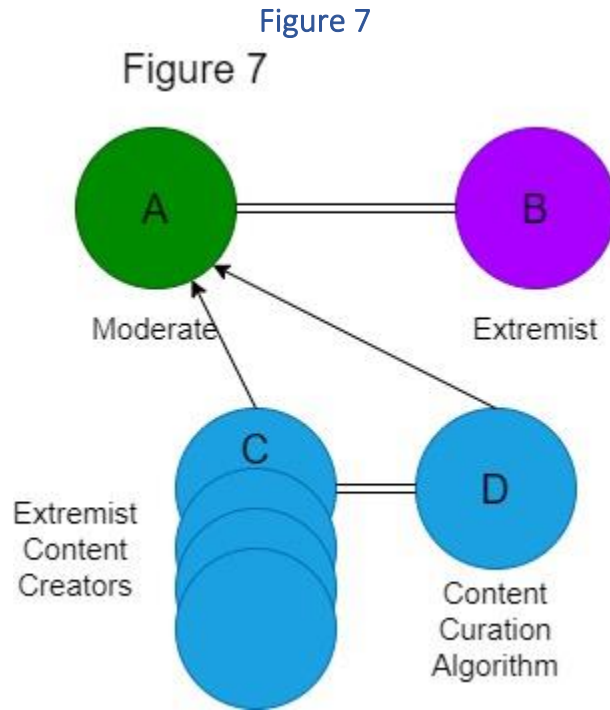
Figure 7

Referring to previous models once again, consider Figure 5. It shows a potential equilibrium as two opposed extremists act upon one another and a Moderate simultaneously. In an online space this interaction can occur identically to how it was presented before, but it can also become modified based on how a social media platform interacts with users.
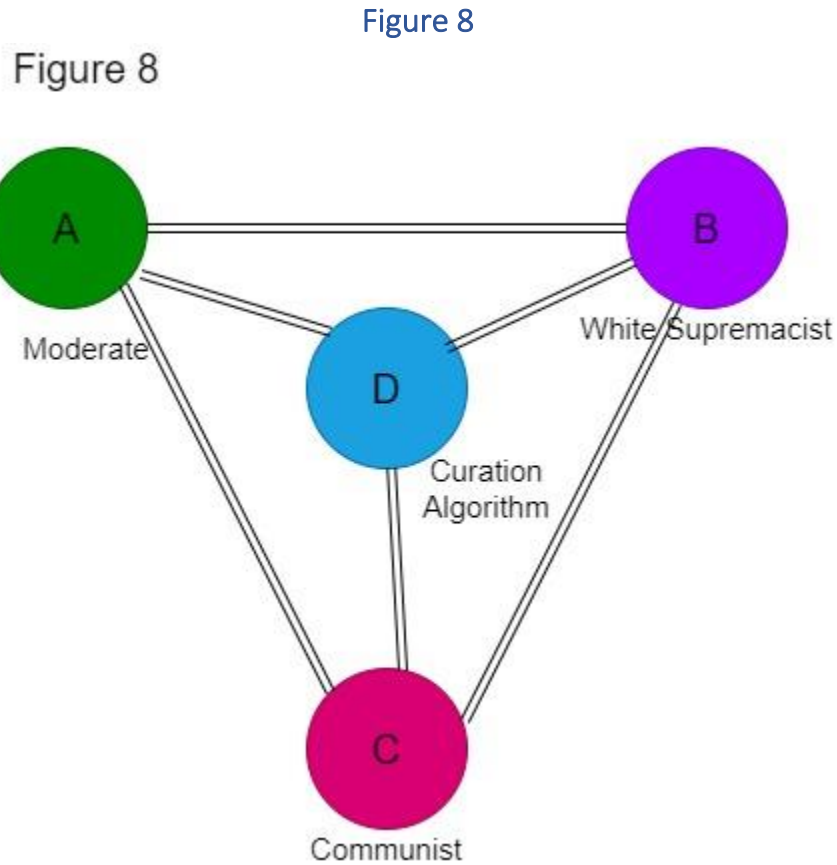
Figure 8

Figure 8, seen above, represents one such modification. In this model, the

previous triangle of actors exists, but now a Curation Algorithm is acting upon each actor

in turn. This curation algorithm serves to "encourage" conversation, showing each of the

other three Actors public facing conversations occurring between the other two. This

means that at any point, the three could join an ongoing conversation, derailing what was

already ongoing, something that might prevent the Moderate from becoming inculcated

with a radical ideology, but may also interrupt the proposed balance the two opposing

extremists represent, with one butting into a conversation to tear apart an argument that

might have kept the Moderate from taking a side meaningfully. Another possibility is that

the algorithm shows an argument between the two extremists in which one of them,

possessing superior rhetorical skill, appears as the winner. In this way an argument made

in real life the Moderate might never even see is made obvious to him, and seeing one of the two deeply opposed sides come out as the winner of a debate, he may be inculcated with some element of that ideology, or with a favorability toward the winning extremist that makes them more susceptible inculcation of extreme ideologies, essentially setting up the situation modeled by Figure 5.a.

Moving on now from the subject of recruitment as a vector for radicalism, there are two more minor vectors that are key in bringing someone to become a radical. These are economic conditions and environments. A desperate person is generally more willing to take extreme actions to meet their needs or solve their problems than someone who is secure and calm. While many factors can lead someone to become desperate, a common cause of desperation is economic condition. An individual who is in poverty, or feels as if they are threatened with poverty, can easily become desperate the moment something places stress upon them. The threat of basic needs like food, water, and shelter being taken away, or already being scarce, weighs heavily on them. In these conditions people can be quick to turn to any source for a solution, be a material one or an ideological one. The stress of those economic conditions might lead them to seek to blame some party for their condition, and this is where many radical ideologies find a foothold, often providing an answer of who is to blame for their harsh conditions or else giving them a salve for the stress inflicted by their conditions through religious succor in the case of extremist religious groups. There is a sense of community, unity, and purpose inherent to radical groups that draws in the needy and the desperate and can make them into dangerous extremists. This should not be taken as a statement that the poor are all likely to be radical or at risk of becoming so, but rather it is an observation that poverty can act to

increase the chance of radicalization. In a nation like America, where even the very poor often have access to the internet, they are even more likely to make contact with radical ideas and become inculcated with them.

Economic condition is but one part of a broader cause of radicalization, environment. This term could be taken to mean literally ever factor of an individual's environment, from climate to local demographics, but in this context it means the political environment, the mixture of political ideas and identities represented in their family, community, and beyond. This environment could conceivably be expanded to encompass geopolitical factors that span the globe and affect entire nation states, but the exact reverberations of such events are difficult to quantify, especially when it comes to their exact effect on individuals. For the purposes of this paper environment is limited mainly to the communities to which an individual belongs. The most immediate of these is likely to be family. A family that is right wing is likely to influence a member toward right wing thought, especially in the case of the influence parents have on children. But the opposite can also occur, a child can rebel against the norms and turn toward other politics as they mature. A left wing family might find that their child has become strongly right wing, perhaps even moving so far to the extremes that they now hold radical beliefs. Communities other than the family, such as schools, workplaces, social clubs, etc can impact an individual as well. The need to fit in, or simply continual contact, unavoidable due to circumstances like employment can lead to inculcation via either ready acceptance or the eventual wearing down that comes with hearing something day in and day out. Social media, by definition, provides access to communities online, and the interplay of

online community and real life community can be complex and very effective in driving

someone toward extremism.

Consider the aforementioned example of the rebellious child moving in an

opposite direction of their parents politically. The internet serves as an easy way to

facilitate such a turn, providing access to numerous spaces where this child, who is

willing to break from their parents, might find people saying exactly the sort of thing they

want to hear to validate their own opinions. This search for validation may make them

very susceptible to inculcation with radical ideas, as they may come to see the people

who validate their beliefs as authority figures whose ideas should be readily accepted.

This can bring them into a situation where the need to fit in also plays a role, as pressure

to match the prevailing ideology of an online community's in group may lead to

inculcation with radical ideology. Another situation in which a need to fit in can come

into play is nonpolitical communities, such as a community centered around a video

game. If the prevailing political ideology of such a group skewed radical, a new player

may find himself inculcated with that radical ideology simply because the vast majority

of people who share his interest in that video game are also radicals.

Online communities can also undergo collective radicalization under the correct

circumstances. When a group has a prevailing ideological predisposition and is to some

extent insular and invested in its own group identity (i.e. video game enthusiasts who, as

a group, assign some value to being enthusiasts) members of the group can react

negatively when that predisposition is challenged, especially if the challenge is from a

perceived outsider. For example, in 2014 a movement known as Gamergate arose in

response to a perceived incursion upon a video game enthusiast community who

members had a strong investment in their identity as gamers. Gamergate was a harsh

reaction to the attempts by several feminist writers to provide meaningful feminist

critique of what they identified as sexist trends in video games. The movement began as

an attempt to refute these critiques, which were unpopular with the predominantly right-

wing gamer community. It evolved from heated refutation to virulent anti-feminism and

outright harassment of those who were perceived as invading the community's space and

threatening its identity. Because the feminists were viewed as radically left wing by the

gamers, they were utterly unwilling to consider leftwing viewpoints, even if they were

more or less moderate. By contrast, the gamers were more than willing to accept radical

right-wing ideas from nearly anyone who could package it with a critique of the feminists

they had come to despise. A number of right-wing figures, including former White House

advisor Steve Bannon, used the event to begin inculcating large numbers of these gamers

with radical right-wing ideologies, typically white supremacist ones. This sort of insular

tribalism and harsh reaction is not unique to online communities, it can and has happened

in real life numerous times. Real life reactions like this are often hindered in their scale

and effect by the simple logistics of organizing a large number of people, but online

thousands of people can easily come together to carry out aggressive, politically

motivated action with relative ease, as finding a particular user account is trivial and it

takes only moments out of someone's day to write an aggressive message to that account.

The energy needed for the group to act as one was reduced substantially by acting online

and as such the ability for this movement to spread its farther and effect more people was

increased. The radicalizing effect of the movement was therefore much greater online

than it could have hoped to have been in real life. The environment communities like

these create is a tense and polarized one, one that stands to repulse as many people as it pulls in, pushing them to take on radical views to the opposite of the problem group.

Solutions

Now that the factors behind radicalization and the ways in which these factors are aided and amplified by the internet have been discussed in full, potential solutions can be discussed. This section will focus mainly on the internet and social media and how they can be shaped to lessen their impact on radicalization, as the processes that lead to radicalization are themselves inherent to society and social relations, it is basically impossible to solve some of these problems on that level. But the internet is a constructed thing, a tool and infrastructure that can be altered. Perhaps not easily or quickly but reforming it so that it no longer has such an impact on radicalization would hopefully contribute to a safer and healthier society and as far as cybersecurity is concerned, would lessen many of the security threats that originate on the internet. While solving poverty or ending racism would be wonderful and magnificent achievements that would deal a serious blow to radicalism, no such achievement is likely in the next decade, but restructuring a social media platform so that it cannot be used to spread racist rhetoric is achievable within that same time span if not less time.

One obvious place to start with these platforms is their overall structure. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and many others are designed with algorithmic content curation in mind. The function of these algorithms is simple, they show users content that, based upon previous user actions, they can deduce the user will like and importantly, that will keep the user engaged and actively using the platform. While the function is simple, the actual inner workings of these algorithms is complex and ever changing, a

convoluted mire of machine learning that will just as often show a user 30 things she's

seen already simply because nothing new and closely fitting can be found. All this is in

service of showing the user ads, which are the lifeblood of the platforms and are often

algorithmically curated themselves in order to effectively target users with ads that will

appeal to them. As discussed earlier, this sort of algorithm is also responsible for aiding

in user radicalization. Restructuring these platforms to avoid the use of these algorithms

is likely one of the most effective measures that could be taken to reduce a platform's

capacity to radicalize people. However, it is meaningless to simply say that a

restructuring must happen, any structure could replace the current one and be just as bad

or worse. So what sort of structure is best suited to slowing these radicalization? The

answer is messy. Obviously one could conceivably strip a platform down to its bare

bones, remove public profiles, algorithmic curation, the ability to share someone else's

post, etc, but that leaves you with something that just isn't a social network, and the goal

here is to restructure a platform so that it is a safer form of social network. One social

network worthy of examination is Reddit.

Reddit is structured as a series of distinct forums called subreddits. Users can

make posts on a subreddit which are then directly voted for or against by the users, called

upvoting (similar to liking a post on Facebook) and downvoting (similar to disliking a

video on YouTube). Comments can be made on a post and these comments can also be

upvoted or downvoted. A typical reddit post will be an image, video, or piece of text at

the head, with a several chains of comments discussing the content of the post and often

subjects related to it. Reddit is by no means an exemplar of perfect platform design, as it

has struggled with moderation due to each subreddit being moderated almost exclusively

by volunteers, but it has been shown that some element of Reddit's structure is actively

harmful to the ability of radicals to unite and organize as movements (Buyukozturk et al,

2018). Unfortunately, Buyukozturk was not able to explain what mechanism within

Reddit was directly responsible for this hindrance, their best guess is that, while Reddit's

structure actively encourages engagement in discourse, it does not focus that engagement

in a way that creates consensus. Radicals bicker among themselves as often as they argue

with those opposed to one another and thus fail to present a cohesive front that organize

in a more effective manner than flinging abuse at those few individuals they can all agree

are bad. This doesn't make them any less radical, simply less dangerous due to the lack of

organization and amount of energy wasted fighting amongst themselves rather than

performing actions that might radicalize others.

One notable element of Reddit's structure that might be responsible for hindering

radicals is its subreddit structures. Unlike some platforms, Reddit uses no algorithm to

recommend or show content to a user in its default state, rather the user populates a feed

with content of their choosing by subscribing to different subreddits. this means that a

user can only be exposed to the content of a subreddit if they are subscribed and while the

site does recommend new subreddits, it doesn't show the content of those subreddits, it

simply lists their names and links to them. Further, any discourse, where most ideological

exchanges are going to happen, happens in the comments, which can be completely

ignored on many subreddits as the bulk of the content is images or videos, often with

little in the way of the political content if any. In short, if a user wants politics, especially

radical politics, they must seek them out actively. This means that even if a user find

himself inculcated with some radical ideas after reading through a few comment threads,

he might not know where to find a community of people with the same radical ideas and won't be pulled further into radicalization. Further, as Buyukozturk points out, reddit is extremely open for debate and discussion and its comment system can allow for conversations that are going nowhere to continue for a long time, allowing for completely frivolous and time-consuming arguments over tiny things. This propensity for nitpicking keeps meaningful ideological discussion from arising. Taking these features into consideration, a better structure for social media may then be one where content is self-curated, similar to how Reddit users choose which subreddits to subscribed to, and one where discourse is encouraged and open to an extent that is actually forms a hindrance to the movement of ideas. Reddit shows such a model can be profitable and successful, though as stated it isn't perfect.

One thing to understand about many of these solutions is that they cannot be implemented without a full investment of the platform itself. This is part of why the issues pointed out in this paper have festered for so long on so many different social media platforms, implementing a solution directly threatens the profitability of the platforms. Take YouTube as an example. YouTube is infamous for its content curation algorithm, which is designed not just to show a user content they might like, but also to instill a habit of continual engagement, rewarding content that gets more engagement over longer periods with more exposure. The algorithm is continually being fine tuned of course, only so that it is better at encouraging the user behavior that is most profitable. The same user behavior that sends people down rabbit holes of extremist content and helps radicalize them. So while the solutions I suggest here could very well help a platform like YouTube escape from the continual accusations of hosting radical content

and perhaps even solve other issues with the platform like gaming the algorithm for engagement, but it would require YouTube find a new business model profitable enough to make the transition worthwhile, which is itself a problem I am not qualified to even attempt and solve.

One way that these platforms could begin to address their radicalizing effects would be to dispense with their attempt to remain ideologically neutral. Often, in order to avoid bad press or simply to dodge the messy issue of publicly believing in something, social media platforms will try and play the neutral party. As discussed at the very outset of this paper, the idea of a politically neutral individual, or in this case corporation, is utterly laughable. While Facebook may not have a meaningful stake as an entity in whether a Democrat or Republican is in the White House, it does have a stake in its own profitability, and that means it has an interest in politics, typically in regards to its ability to lobby for intellectual property protections and other such methods of shoring itself up against potential losses to competitors, but politics all the same. Lawmakers, activists, and the general public can use this reality to push platforms like Facebook to acknowledge that they are political entities, and to then hold them accountable for their politics. In this way, stronger measures against radical content can be put in place. This solution avoids the issue of changing the business model to slow radicalism by pressuring the platforms with the potential loss of profit continued bad press represents. However, this solution is limited both in that it ultimately doesn't fix the structural problems at work on these platforms, and in that the threat of bad press will only go so far against these platforms. There is no good way to hold them accountable in the long term or to

ensure that changes put into place are actual fixes and empty gestures meant to appease critics.

Another solution that doesn't necessarily require a change in business model is moderation, though it is one rife with issues. Most major platforms make use of a combination of automated and manual moderation, with an algorithm detecting certain forbidden material (typically copyrighted material posted without permission) and removing it automatically, while human moderators deal with any specific reports of forbidden activity, as they can judge with better clarity than an algorithm whether or not a particular statement should be considered harassment or not. There are problems with both types of moderation. First, the algorithms typically lack precision or nuance, as mentioned before, and can easily strike down entirely inoffensive content because it resembles just enough something forbidden. Notably, the platform Tumblr banned pornographic content and used a fully automated system to identify and remove it. The system was mocked mercilessly for its tendency to flag any image of a human being as pornography, or in some cases images of things like flowers. Now obviously more sophisticated algorithmic systems exist, but they still run into the same problems often enough that they are less than reliable in most circumstances. Meanwhile, manual moderation has a number of problems of its own. While a human is more than capable of perceiving nuance where a machine would fail, they have their limits. Often the teams of moderators employed by a platform are simply too few to handle the load of reported information received by them. Thus work hours become grueling and exhausting affecting the ability of a moderator to even do their job correctly. Meanwhile, a great deal of the content they must review is deeply traumatizing to work with, even without taking

potentially disturbing content made by extremists into account. Videos of extreme violence are typically disallowed on most platformed and thus moderators will often find themselves forced to view such content when it reported. Obviously an algorithm might be able to catch these sorts of videos and relieve the human moderators of that particular strain, but as stated before these algorithms are not perfect. If they miss something it will reach the human moderators, and that's assuming they even target the correct content to begin with, they could very well fixate on harmless content like clips from horror and action movies that do not violate any platforms rules and meanwhile leave the human moderators to deal with the actual problem. Finding a solution to the failures of these two moderation forms is tricky. A combined approach of algorithmically filtering certain content has the exact flaws I discussed above, and while a platform might hire more human moderators, there is only so much extra manpower can accomplish. Consider Facebook, which has literally millions of active users, or YouTube, where hundreds of hours of video are uploaded within a single day. The scale that these platforms reach is enormous and seemingly in many ways unmanageable. This may partly go back to the structure of the platforms and the way they incentivize user behavior through their content curation. Reddit is a sizeable platform in its own right with millions of users that uses mainly volunteer moderators within each subreddit to keep order. Now this isn't a perfect system, it opens the door for moderators to becomes tyrants over certain communities and volunteer moderators for subreddits of radicals are unlikely to be anything other than radicals themselves, which only allows for those communities to fester and spread their ideology until higher level action is taken by site admins. However, going back to how Reddit's structure may have certain advantages over other

platforms with regards to hindering radicalization, this approach to moderation may

present a solution to the issue of human moderation and algorithmic moderation.

Specifically, a combination of the three methods could serve to alleviate the

shortcomings of all three. First, the volunteer moderators can keep the vast majority of

prohibited content from circulating, including keeping tabs on political discussion when it

does arise. Next, the algorithm can handle issues like copyright infringing posts so long

as close human eye is kept on them to prevent erroneous removal. Finally, human

moderators employed by the platform can handle any content that gets past the volunteers

and the algorithm, which should be a much lighter load and less prone to being

traumatizing. However, as stated before, the volunteer system only works on a platform

where specific community spaces exist, which is not the case on most platforms, except

in a limited form (such as Facebook groups). Secondly, this three-tiered approach to

moderation would require a bit of specialized engineering to ensure that volunteer

moderators who might want to promote certain content can't act in a manner that

prevents the employee moderators from seeing it. Again, not a perfect system, but

possibly one that would work well to not only prevent various other forms of digital

detritus from getting onto various sites, but also to help corral and control radicals so that

they pose less threat of radicalizing others.

One solution that I have come across with regards to platforms like Twitter and

Facebook is to nationalize them, removing the profit incentive from their operation and

allowing for a total restructuring to prevent radical ideology from spreading. This is

potentially a decent solution, but it depends heavily on how the government operates the

platform. It would be incredibly easy for censorship to run rampant on these platforms

under these circumstances, and given the prevalence of these platforms in most people's lives, especially with regards to how they get news, it would pose a serious threat to democracy if an incumbent president had meaningful control over these platforms. There is also the issue of these platforms having users from nearly every nation on earth, meaning that making it the property of one nation could give that nation an outsized influence on international media.

Where the nationalization idea fails due to inherent issues of giving a specific state control of a platform as omnipresent and influential as Facebook or Twitter, there may be something to be said for the removal of the profit motive from the proceedings. As stated above, the elements of these platforms most responsible for radicalizing people are tied directly to the need to produce profit. If Facebook or Twitter were to be converted into an independent, but not profit driven organization it could present a chance for restructuring, transparency, and genuine progress on fixing the amplifying effects of the platform. Of course, there are two huge problems with this solution as well. First, the amount of money necessary to support platforms of this size is enormous and difficult to come by unless they are seeking and producing profits as well as pulling in investment capital. Second, it would be a titanic effort to get these companies to change to a nonprofit model of operation when they stand to generate incredible profits as is.

This leaves us at an impasse. Most of the solutions suggested here require large scale restructuring or either platform architecture or business model or else a total break from for profit operation. At the beginning of this section I stated that solving the societal factors that create radicals to begin with was either impossible or nearly so, depending on the factor in question, and now at the end of the discussion of how to solve the

amplifying effects of social media it seems mountains must be moved to affect meaningful change here to, and that is true. However, where solving the problem of poverty or the flow of dangerous ideas through society without stopping the flow of ideas itself are problems that have been met with not true solution throughout the whole of human history, the problems posed by social media have only exists for a little over a decade. Corporate entities with incredible reach have existed before and have been made to change for the betterment of society before. In another decade's time the changes I have discussed here could in part or in whole, have been put into place to great effect and to the betterment of society. They may not be easy solutions or perfect solutions, but given the right drive from activists, law makers, and the public at large social media can be shifted to serve its purpose as a virtual space for connection and communication without creating waves of radicalization that harm society at large. The approach must be one of pragmatism, not pessimism and with some luck things will change for the better.

Conclusion

Radicalism is, as I have said, a difficult thing to define as the question of what is radical has much to do with the attitudes of the society that asks the question. Radicals are an inevitability of society, one that can threaten its current structure, sometimes for better but often for worse. While no society can eliminate radicals, it can combat them via many methods and in the modern age it is necessary to combat them in the virtual space of the internet, to prevent them from perverting the greatest means for information exchange to ever exist for the purposes of violence and hate. As someone who hopes to work in cyber security after college I feel it is important to look not just at how I can help protect computer infrastructure from various threats or how I can use my skills to

investigate crimes committed with or on a computer, but also how I can use my understanding of the internet, its technologies, and its industry to improve it overall, to make it a safer, better space to exist socially and to maintain its function as a tool of information exchange. The political movements birthed on the internet can be both positive and negative forces, and those that are negative represent what I see as an inevitable price of the free flow of information. Ideas cannot be killed and so even the most heinous of them can persist and find purchase, especially in the collective spaces of social media, where millions of people are connected at once. The title of this paper, *Nothing has Changed Since Yesterday*, is meant to communicate that the issue of modern day political polarization and renewed radicalism are not the result of a shiny new technology in the form of social media, but of inherent functions of society. We cannot change the fact that humans are social animals, that we have biases, or that we exchange information, and if that is true radicalism of different stripes will exist. What role the internet does play in this modern political landscape is one of amplification, its structure serving not to replace or invent new forms of social interactions, but to heighten what already exists, to increase the rate at which they occur and the speed at which someone can become completely absorbed into a subject. This can be a good thing, when it brings someone into a new hobby or helps them discover some new aspect of themselves, but often it is not, instead serving help indoctrinate people, most often young teens, with radical and dangerous ideology.

To conclude, I hope that this paper has served to elucidate you on the nature of radicalization as a phenomenon and to help you understand better how the role the internet plays within that nature. Hopefully it will motivate you to pay close attention to

social media platforms, how they are managed, how they change, who is using them, and for what purpose. I hope also that it will motivate you to support efforts to reform and improve these social media platforms. I believe that these platforms can be a great boon to our society, but only if they undergo intense work to improve and to rid themselves of what hopefully, will one day be seen as growing pains for these platforms.

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