

# **Examining the Practices of Hate Groups on Youtube**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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## **Introduction**

Because of this newfound reliance on digital technology, it has become increasingly important to analyze the effects that this technology has on society and determine how it might be changed to maximize its benefits while minimizing its harm. The internet is an incredible tool for communication, as it allows for constant and seamless communication between any individuals or groups, the transfer of user-generated content unlike previously possible, and the destruction of many of the barriers previously preventing communication, including distance and speed.

However, this is a double-edged sword, as malicious users can utilize the internet's incredible tools for communication to spread false information and hate. Because of this, widespread use of the internet, both in the United States and abroad, has led to a misinformation epidemic, the popularization and evolution of hate speech, the rise of hate groups, and even the organization and encouragement of violent events. Combating hate groups and far-right ideology online has become a growing problem, not only for fringe, non-mainstream, websites but even for major social media platforms. Many different social groups have attempted to use its capabilities of disseminating information for the purpose of spreading their ideas; however, few have been as successful as the far right. Online hate groups have gained an incredible amount of control and influence over online spaces relative to their small size in mainstream American politics. Far-right hate groups have taken advantage of social media websites like Youtube, a video sharing website, which have content relational algorithms, content alerts from specified creators, and other features that allow for communication to large audiences. By utilizing these features, hate groups like the Federation for American Immigration Reform have been able to amass hundreds, or even thousands of followers online. For my thesis, I will examine how these hate groups have used Youtube as a means for disseminating their message, spreading

misinformation, and expanding their influence. By understanding this, engineers will better be able to anticipate the actions of these hate groups and design, allowing them to better prevent these groups from taking advantage of their technology.

### **Examining Behaviors Using Technological Determinism**

The internet is a relatively new and constantly evolving communication technology which allows for the connection of people across vast distances, the dissemination of information to large audiences, and the creation and replication of content generated by its users. These factors have led to widespread usage in modern American society. This platform is an incredibly important facet of online culture and has become a necessary source of entertainment and information for millions of Americans. Because of this, it is vital to ensure that Youtube is not facilitating the spread of hate speech or causing harm to marginalized groups. It is important, then, to analyze the users of Youtube that would seek to harm these marginalized groups to determine how they utilize the functionalities of this social media platform.

The evolution of internet infrastructure and social media is a unique example of how technology shapes the behaviors of its users. For this paper, I will be utilizing Technological Determinism to analyze the online behavior of hate groups. Technological Determinism is a sociological theory that aims to connect the usage of technology to the actions of different social groups. This theory was created by Thorstein Veblen in the 20th century, where he made the claim that technology guides human behavior, saying “the machine throws out anthropomorphic habits of thought.” Technological Determinism is the theory that a culture’s technology defines its cultural practices and norms. A good example of this is the laws surrounding driving. Nothing about the existence of cars necessitates that roads, which were previously used by pedestrians, be

cleared of all foot traffic. However, because the use of cars presents a danger to people, the culture surrounding the use of cars has dictated that streets should be clear. Technological Determinism is useful for examining not only what technology has for society, but how technology is being used in a society. This is especially useful for this research question because it allows for the examination of the behavior of far-right actors, and how technology has influenced their behavior and facilitated the spread of their ideology. This framework will help examine the actual practices behind these hate groups and their actions online, and establish a clear sense of intention and action. By doing this, we will better be able to understand how these groups take advantage of the technology featured on Youtube. This understanding is crucial when designing new technologies because it helps engineers anticipate and prevent these problems from reappearing.

For this paper, I will be using the theory of Technological Determinism to examine the relationship between hate groups and Youtube. The purpose of this analysis is to understand why these hate groups have chosen Youtube as their platform for information dissemination and how Youtube can change their website to prevent the spread of these groups and their ideologies. Technological Determinism analyzes the cultural practices of social groups with regard to a specific technology. I will be examining the cultural practices of the 71 hate groups listed on the Southern Poverty Law Center database of hate groups, what their presence is on Youtube, and how they may or may not use Youtube to spread hate speech and misinformation about marginalized groups (Hate Groups Database, 2022). By performing this analysis, I will determine how these groups use Youtube as a vehicle for hate and oppression, which can then be used to adjust the website to prevent this behavior.

## Case Context

Youtube is one of the most viewed and most relied on websites on the internet. It is a video-sharing social media website that was originally created in 2005 by Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim (Hosch, 2022). Its purpose is to post and share user-generated videos. This is done by creating a channel and uploading videos to that channel. Videos can only be uploaded onto Youtube if they meet the website's community guidelines, a rule that is enforced by a machine learning algorithm which reviews uploaded videos and monitors for violations. Other users can subscribe to a Youtube channel, which notifies them when new content is posted and recommends new content more often from those channels. The website uses "content tagging", which allows creators to "tag" their videos with certain keywords that may be searched for. These tags also help relate similar content to each other. It also uses machine learning algorithms to recommend content to its users based on their previous search history, similarity to videos that that user previously engaged with, engagement with the videos being recommended, etc.

Youtube has had trouble in the past moderating hate groups and far-right content creators. For instance, content creators like James Allsup began on Youtube. Allsup started his channel in 2015, where he primarily made videos about right-wing politics and responding to democrats and left-leaning speakers. In 2017, James began talking about more far-right views, defending Richard Lynn's claims about intellectual differences between races, and even attended the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Around this time, James also joined the American Identity Movement, a white-nationalist organization. However, despite his white-supremacist and white-nationalist views, James was not taken off of Youtube until 2019, when his channel already had half a million subscribers (James Orien Allsup, 2022). James is now listed as an

extremist and white-nationalist on the Southern Poverty Law Center website (James Orien Allsup, 2022).

In 2012, Anita Sarkeesian, a video game critic and feminist, began fundraising for an internet series talking about sexist tropes in video games. Video gaming has been a male-dominated pastime since the invention of at-home consoles in the 1970s and 1980s, so not only was this meant to be a critique of video game developers attitudes towards women, it was an attempt to make video games more accessible and appealing to women, expanding the hobby (Innuendo Studios, 2021). However, this fundraiser was discovered by members of the far right on 4Chan. These members would spend the next two years harassing her online, making threats about her safety, and, in one instance, getting a speaking engagement of hers canceled because of a threat to shoot up a school (Innuendo Studios, 2021). One of the main tools that fueled this campaign were the many content creators on Youtube who used this as an opportunity to spread misogyny and anti-feminism. These content creators, including users like Sargon of Akkad and ShoeOnHead, created a network of “anti-S. J. W.”, or anti-social justice warriors, content creators, all of whom were linked through the various means of content relation on Youtube. Both of these creators remain on Youtube to this day.

Youtube’s history with far-right disinformation campaigns, violence, and problematic content creators shows that it has a problem with platforming hatred and violence. Because of this, it is important to see how extremists and hate groups use Youtube. By doing so, we can change this technology to prevent more harassment, stop harm directed towards marginalized groups, and create a more accepting online space.

## **Research Question and Methods**

How do hate groups utilize the features of Youtube to communicate their ideology and how can the website adapt to better mitigate the spread of these groups? To answer this question, I will first consult research and analysis done by other researchers to better understand how these hate groups communicate with each other and outside individuals using other similar platforms. Doing this will help me identify patterns in how these groups behave, keywords and hidden messaging (known as “dog-whistling”), and other information that will help inform my search for information on these groups further along in the process.

Next, I will examine Youtube’s search algorithm to find all information about these groups that is readily available on the website. To do this, I will first start by creating a new Youtube account with no previously viewed videos, previous searches, user data or user-generated content, etc. The purpose of this is to eliminate bias in search results. Youtube automatically adjusts search results based on previously gathered user data, so it is important to ensure that Youtube is not filtering out content related to these groups because of this. This will help ensure that all content about these groups will be shown when performing searches.

Then, I will perform searches involving the names of each group, previous actions or notable events involving each group, and any other identifying keywords. First, I will search through the video content and mark down what types of videos are available. They will fall into one of three categories: general presence, informational content, and direct content. General presence videos are videos that reference hate groups or their actions, but do not directly introduce or explain the hate group, or provide significant details about the beliefs or memberships. An example of this is any video that makes reference to hate groups without providing other details. Informational videos constitute anything that describes hate groups, regardless of whether or not this description is negative. This could include news stories that

directly cover the actions of a hate group, descriptions of events involving the hate group, etc.

Direct content is anything that is officially put out by the hate group or its members, or anything that gives members of the hate group the opportunity to speak unfiltered. This could include videos of real-life meetings, official Youtube videos created by the hate groups, interviews with members of the hate groups, etc.

Next, I will examine the tags and other relational data for each of the videos relating to these groups. I will do this to determine whether these groups attempt to relate their content to other content generated by the same source, content generated by other hate groups or other groups with similar beliefs.

Finally, I will examine how members are allowed to present themselves on Youtube. Youtube allows its users to create channels which they can customize, display their data, and post content. I will search for keywords and phrases to determine whether members are allowed to self-identify with these groups and whether these groups are allowed to have official channels on which to post content. Understanding these two aspects will paint a picture of what Youtube allows these groups to do. For each of the official channels that generate content, I will examine the engagement for each channel (in terms of likes, comments and subscriber count), and draw conclusions about the behaviors of these groups by comparing the most popular groups behaviors. Comments will be examined by finding the ratio of positive to negative comments under the most popular video on the channel posted within the last year.

## **Results**

There are three main ways that hate groups utilize the features of Youtube to spread their message: masking hate speech and misinformation and buying ad space to promote content and



taking advantage of the content recommendation algorithm by using viewer engagement to push their. Table 1, below, details the results of the analysis performed on the Youtube search feature. Each entry in the table was gathered by searching for the names of each hate group or terms that may relate to that group specifically. The rows represent the type of content that is able to be found by searching for each group, and the columns represent the categories of hate groups examined. These categories are taken from the Southern Poverty Law Center database on hate groups (Hate Groups Database, 2022). A total of 71 groups were sampled for this analysis; however, categories with fewer than 4 hate groups were omitted from the table, and some groups belonged to several categories.

	Anti-Immigrant	Anti-LGBTQ	Anti-Government	KKK	Militia Movement	Neo-Nazi	White Nationalist
Number of groups sampled	6	9	6	4	4	9	15
General presence	5	9	6	1	3	6	8
Informational content	5	9	6	1	3	6	8
Direct Content	5	9	3	0	2	1	4
Open members	5	9	3	0	2	0	3
Official channels	3	8	3	0	2	0	2

Table 1. The results of the searches performed to determine the presence of each hate group on Youtube. (Hamdy, 2022a)

The first way that hate groups are able to take advantage of Youtube's platform is by taking advantage of the culture that surrounds it. All content uploaded to Youtube must abide by the terms of service of the website. These terms of service contain rules against hate speech that includes rhetoric including calls to violence or hatred towards groups of people based on race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, etc. However, despite these rules, nineteen of these hate groups are allowed to have official Youtube channels that represent their organizations and post direct content about these groups. In fact, of the 9 anti-LGBT hate groups sampled, all 9 had open supporters and direct content uploaded and 8 had official channels. This is allowed because these groups mask their content to appear less harmful.

Liberty Council, for example, claims to be a religious podcast that talks about "Faith and Freedom". They post speeches and talk shows discussing major conservative issues like abortion, critical race theory, and introducing religion into politics. However, this group also publishes content like "The Dangerous 'Equality Act'", which misgenders transgender women, makes the false claim that the equality act applies to pedophilia, and directly advocates for discrimination against members of the LGBT community (Liberty Counsel, 2021). These videos, though they are filled with misinformation and hate speech, are allowed on Youtube under the guise of "political philosophy".

The second masking technique that hate groups use is to pose as political commentators. The Federation for American Immigration Reform, for instance, hosts a weekly podcast that spreads misinformation about Latin-American migrants and asylum seekers. This news cast has included pieces such as "What happens when an advanced nation loses control of people entering the country?", which claims that the Biden administration has dismantled immigration

enforcement, the false claim that I.C.E. has made no removals in 2021, and conflated incoming immigrants and refugees with the end of the country (Federation for American Immigration Reform 2022, ICE Statistics 2021).

The American College of Pediatricians takes a different route for masking their misinformation. This group claims to post medical information that involves the sex lives and transitionary procedures of members of the LGBT community. The video “The Truth About Puberty Blockers”, claims that puberty blockers and transitory hormones deny young people the ability to accept their body and grow out of their “anxious discomfort” (American College of Pediatricians, 2021). This claim, however, is not backed by any citations or research and seems to have a fundamental misunderstanding of Gender Dysphoria, conflating it with puberty anxiety. When this group does post research, it is widely criticized as being a thinly veiled excuse for homophobia (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022). However, because they disguise themselves as a legitimate medical research institution, Youtube still allows them to spread misinformation and anti-LGBT rhetoric.

Of the 19 groups with official Youtube channels, 13 of them mask themselves as conservative news organizations, sources of information on the conservative political philosophy, or some other form of political organization, 4 of them pretend to be legitimate research institutions, all of which have been widely criticized for the content of their research, and 2 of them mask as religious groups.

	Uploads	Subscribers	Total channel views	Positive comments	Negative comments
The Remembrance Project	112	174	34,309	7	0
Center for Immigration Studies	743	5,360	2,019,208	13	1
Federation for American Immigration Reform *ad*	845	12,700	80,932,465	6	6
American Family Association	234	3,080	159,583	D	D
Family Research Council	920	8,640	2,703,739	D	D
Liberty Counsel	1,002	3,460	347,666	D	D
Alliance Defending Freedom *ad*	554	34,300	60,966,474	11	2
Family Watch International	63	2,020	296,352	D	D
Pacific Justice	293	4,190	530,344	5	0
American College of Pediatricians	23	311	18,879	0	0
ACT for America *ad*	539	83,900	18,096,202	41	2
Center for Security Policy	1828	25,600	10,49,099	7	0
World Net Daily	624	10,000	1,946,524	0	0
National Liberty Alliance	76	2,890	243,428	D	D
United Constitutional Patriots	135	2,130	55,258	0	0
America's Promise Ministry	1,142	837	168,684	8	0
Proud Boys	17	1,720	101,816	0	0
American Freedom Party	196	2,570	590,890	0	0
VDARE	68	246	2,826	0	0

Table 2. The engagement data gathered on each hate group. (Hamdy, 2022b).

Table 2 shows the engagement of each of the hate group's official Youtube channels. Of the 19 groups sampled, the three most engaged with channels were the Federation for American Immigration Reform, the Alliance Defending Freedom, and ACT for America. All three of these groups engage in similar masking techniques as the other groups; however, what sets these groups apart from the others is their regular engagements. The reason that these groups have more engagement is because they pay Youtube to show their videos as advertisements before other videos. These ads are targeted to individuals who are most likely to positively respond to them, primarily individuals who engage with political content and conservative political content.

Behind the visuals of the Youtube platform are several algorithms working to determine what content that users will engage with. These algorithms are designed to recommend content to users based on their previous engagement, the engagement with the content being recommended, and the content descriptions. By masking their content as similar to other content that conservatives engage with on Youtube, like religious content and right-wing political content, these hate groups are able to associate their content with mainstream conservative content like Fox News and PragerU. While performing these searches, content from both Fox News and PragerU were recommended to me. Additionally, when engaging with videos from Fox News and PragerU, videos from the same hate groups I had previously searched for began to appear.

Hate groups on Youtube use a multitude of tactics to spread their ideology. They do this, primarily, by masking their content, and trying to make it seem as similar to mainstream conservative content as possible. In doing this, not only are they able to escape the consequences of violating the terms of service of the website by spreading hate speech and misinformation, they are able to associate their content with other mainstream conservative Youtube content, both

in the eyes of the viewers and to the algorithm. Additionally, in order to grow their audience, well-funded groups will take out political advertisements targeted to audiences likely to engage with their content. These advertisements are viewed thousands or millions of times, and have the potential to massively increase the reach of these channels. These tactics help these hate groups communicate their ideology, spread hatred and misinformation, and make the platform more dangerous for minority groups being attacked.

## **Discussion of Results**

This research examines the behaviors and cultural practices of hate groups on Youtube. These groups have adopted these practices in order to more effectively spread their message on the platform, to find new recruits, and to grow their audience. By utilizing the Technological Determinism framework, I have been able to analyze the behavior patterns of these groups to understand how and why they are able to spread their message. The purpose of Youtube is not to help these groups spread their message; rather, the fact that it does is an unintended consequence of the technology, known as “technological drift”. However, regardless of the intentions of the developers of the website, these issues must be addressed before they lead to the further popularization of these hate groups and subsequent harm to the groups they hate.

This research demonstrates the many ways that hate groups are able to utilize the features of Youtube to radicalize people and establish an audience. This is further verified by “Algorithmic Extremism: Examining YouTube's Rabbit Hole of Radicalization” and “Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube”. These two studies analyze the way that hate speech and hateful messaging are spread on social media through content recommendation algorithms. These studies show that Youtube is a major platform for users who want to spread hateful

messaging and a pipeline for potential recruits. Not only does this research illustrate the channels and content that need to be removed from Youtube, it demonstrates how these features are used and abused, and what aspects of the website need to be made to address these problems.

This analysis was conducted by using the search engine built into Youtube. Because of this, it is possible that results, which may change the data gathered in either direction, were not displayed through these searches. Other hate groups examined from the Southern Poverty Law Center database may have Youtube channels or official Youtube content that has been buried by its search engine. Despite this, it may still appear on recommendations or in other searches. Additionally, the tactics listed are not a complete list of all tactics used by these groups, nor is every tactic applicable to every group. These are patterns observed after examining the behaviors of the different groups.

If I were to redo this research project, I would attempt to partner with members of Youtube to do a more complete search of their databases for content relating it to hate groups. Additionally, I would look more into previous cases on Youtube where hate groups, who have been removed, interact with other users. This data relies a lot on the current state of Youtube, with very little examination of either the past or the future.

This research has better helped me understand the way that information is communicated on the internet. This is an excellent case study for how creating technology that deals with the wide-spread dissemination of information can be dangerous. By creating a system where anyone can create any content they want, consolidating social media websites so that as many people use a select few websites as possible, and recklessly creating content-linking algorithms, we have platformed some of the most dangerous extremist people in our population. Understanding why and how these people were able to establish a platform and communicate their message so

effectively is paramount to establishing secure forms of mass communication without this problem in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Youtube is an incredibly important website in many people's lives. However, the platform creates the opportunity for hate groups to spread their ideology. They do this by masking their messaging, relating to mainstream conservative and religious content, and utilizing advertisements and algorithms. In order to facilitate an environment of inclusivity, Youtube not only needs to ban these groups to prevent them from spreading misinformation, they need to change the features of their website in order to prevent this behavior from happening again. Otherwise, not only will Youtube continue to foster a community that is becoming increasingly dangerous for members of minority groups, the website will continue to be used to fuel the political agendas of hate groups, be utilized to spread political misinformation and hate speech, and contribute to the growing problem of right-wing extremism in American politics.



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