SOCIAL MEDIA, RADICALIZATION, AND DOMESTIC TERRORISM

By Vivian Nguyen

INTRODUCTION

Insurrectionists enter the Capitol on January 6th.
    NBC News

Extremism – the advocacy of or support for radical political, religious, or social beliefs, often involving violence to achieve desired

Picture this: In a small town in the American heartland, an ordinary teenager spends countless hours scrolling through their social media feed. Hidden among the cat videos, vacation photos, and news updates lies extremist content. Suddenly, that teenager finds themselves captivated by radical viewpoints, funneled down a path of violence and anti-democratic values.

In the aftermath of the January 6th attack on the US Capitol, there is a growing concern about the spread of domestic terrorism in the United States, particularly among youth. One factor contributing to this phenomenon is how social media platforms facilitate the radicalization of individuals. By promoting provocative, extreme, social media has become a breeding ground for radicalization and **extremism.**

Who should be responsible for moderating social media content? Congress called upon social media giants, including as Meta (formerly Facebook), Twitter, and TikTok to take more significant action to curb the spreading of extremist beliefs. Social media companies, on the other hand, argue that this task is not their sole responsibility. Furthermore, concerns over free speech complicate this issue. Enforcement agencies, such as the FBI and CIA, also play a significant role in monitoring social media to prevent domestic terrorism. Many watchdogs have raised concerns about privacy and potential abuse of power from federal enforcement agencies when it comes to regulating social media.

EXPLANATION OF THE ISSUE

Historical Development

Screenshot of SixDegrees.com, the first social network.
Buffer.com

The role of social media in extremism and domestic terrorism has evolved as the influence of these platforms has grown. What began in 1997 with the first social media network, SixDegrees.com (with 3.5 million users) has grown into a worldwide phenomenon with multiple platforms, servicing over 4.48 billion people (Dean, 2023). Many commentators heralded social media platforms as tools for connection and information-sharing, especially among young people. Pew Research Center found that in 2021, 84% of 18-29-year-olds used social media (Pew Research Center, 2021). Even President Obama capitalized on the power of social networks during his 2008 presidential campaign (Carr, 2008). However, as the number of users expanded and algorithms evolved, social media platforms became fertile grounds for the spread of extremist content.

The Rise of Online Extremism

Echo chamber
– an environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own beliefs

The viral nature of social media allows extremist ideologies to spread at an unprecedented pace, reaching individuals globally within seconds. Coupled with the **echo chamber effect,** social media provides a platform for like-minded individuals to connect with each other, amplify their messages, and validate their extremist views (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2023). Furthermore, the algorithmic design that aims to maximize engagement and user attention ends up promoting content with high shock value, including extremist narratives. This **algorithmic bias** plays a significant role in the visibility of extremist content.

Scope of the Problem

Content Moderation and Free Speech

One key dilemma when it comes to addressing the role of social media in extremism is the issue of free speech. Striking the right balance is challenging, as regulating extremist content risks accusations of censorship. Nevertheless, allowing some extremist content to proliferate can pose threats to public safety and national security. Policymakers must grapple with questions regarding the responsibility of social media companies in monitoring and moderating content, the need for transparent guidelines, and the creation for regulatory frameworks that ensure accountability without unduly infringing on freedom of expression.

4.48 billion people currently use social media worldwide.

Collaboration and Information Sharing

An effective response to online extremism requires cooperation between social media companies, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies. However, challenges arise when it comes to sharing information due to legal restrictions, privacy concerns, and jurisdictional limitations. Policymakers must navigate these complexities, considering the development of mechanisms that facilitate timely and secure information sharing while ensuring compliance with legal and privacy frameworks. Building trust and fostering partnerships between public and private entities becomes critical to improve coordination, response capabilities, and proactive prevention.
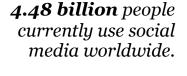
Algorithmic Transparency and Accountability

The algorithms employed by social media platforms play a pivotal role in the dissemination and amplification of extremist content. However, the inner workings of these algorithms are often opaque, leading to concerns about biases, unintended amplification of extremist narratives, and the reinforcement of echo chambers. Policymakers must grapple with how to promote algorithmic transparency and accountability, ensuring that these systems are auditable, understandable, and subject to external scrutiny. Developing standards and regulations that address algorithmic biases, while preserving innovation and competitiveness, is essential to mitigating the impact of these technologies on online extremism.

Congressional Action

Recognizing the urgency of online extremism and domestic terrorism, Congress has pursued several bills aimed at mitigating these problems. Most recently, two pieces of legislation were introduced into the House of the 117th Congress on this issue. H.R. 350 *Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act (DTPA)* would establish offices within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) to coordinate on domestic terrorism. DTPA managed to pass the House but was ultimately stalled in the Senate after failing to reach a filibuster-proof majority of 60 votes (Senate Judiciary Committee, 2022).

Other Policy Action

Outside stakeholders have also taken action to counter the rise of online extremism. Launched in 2017, the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) helps over twenty leading social media and technology companies, such as Meta, Google, Microsoft, and Twitter, coordinate efforts to combat terrorism online. The initiative created a database to identify and share terrorist and violent extremist content (GIFCT). In the same year, the United Nations

Mark Zuckerberg is founder and CEO of Facebook, a founding member of the GIFCT.

Wikipedia

Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) was approved in a resolution. This office launched a Cybersecurity and New Technologies Initiative (CT Tech) to assist member-states around the world in leveraging technology to fight terrorism (CT Tech, 2022).

Because the rise in online extremism is so recent, there have been limited court cases revolving around the debates posed by this issue. However, in 2017, the Supreme Court deemed a state statute banning registered sex offenders from using social media websites as violating the First Amendment's right to free speech (*Packingham v. North Carolina*). This case limited states' ability to restrict individual access to online platforms, even for convicted criminals.

Cartoon drawing of Senior Deputy Attorney General Robert C. Montgomery arguing before the Supreme Court in Packingham v. North Carolina
Courtartist.com

90% *of Republicans say that it is at least somewhat likely that social media platforms censor political viewpoints.*

IDEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

Conservative View

Many conservatives emphasize the importance of protecting free speech rights and express concerns that excessive regulation or content moderation in the efforts to target online extremism could infringe upon individuals' right to express their opinions freely. This sentiment is furthered by their concerns about perceived political bias in content moderation practices. Some conservatives argue that conservative voices and viewpoints are disproportionately targeted and censored. Pew Research Center found that 90% of Republicans say it is at least somewhat likely that social media platforms censor political viewpoints versus 59% of Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2020). However, recently, House Republicans drafted bills that would limit the scope of Section 230 of the **Communications Decency Act** and force social media platforms to moderate their content more so than they do currently (Mitchell, 2021).

Liberal View

Liberals generally support increasing regulation and expanding accountability measures on social media platforms when it comes to the spread of extremist content. Many liberals argue that companies should take a proactive role in moderating and removing such content to protect public safety and prevent the incitement of violence. Around three-quarters of Democrats agree with this sentiment, as opposed to just half of Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2019). Liberals especially emphasize the importance of combatting hate speech, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. This perspective includes implementing stronger content moderation policies and fact-checking mechanisms, such as labeling posts as inaccurate to counter the spread of harmful information. Another concern that some members of both parties share is regarding the algorithmic bias and creation of echo chambers on

social media platforms. Advocacy for greater transparency and accountability in the design of the algorithms was introduced in the 117th Congress under the Algorithmic Justice and Online Platform Transparency Act and Algorithmic Accountability Act of 2022 by Democratic representatives and senators (Markey 2021; Wyden 2022).

AREAS OF DEBATE

Social media companies are private businesses and influencing what kind of information comes from their platform puts the government at risk of violating the First Amendment.

Considering the central role of balancing free speech and countering extremist narratives, this issue is further complicated by how much government regulation and content moderation can this body legally and effectively legislate. Representatives should find common ground and develop comprehensive policy measures that strike this delicate balance.

Enhanced Regulation and Oversight

One of the most discussed solution to combat the proliferation of extremism on social media is increasing regulation and oversight over the platforms. Having adequate content moderation, age-appropriate content filtering, and greater transparency keeps bad actors from spreading extremist beliefs and thoughts. When these companies are legally required to keep track of what kind of content is being spread on their platforms, they will have a better understanding of where and when violent extremists are conducting outreach. Government agencies and congressional committees can require regular updates or reports from these companies on certain practices.

Federal Communications Commission – an independent agency that regulates communications by radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable across the US

Regulation could be achieved by passing legislation that requires algorithmic transparency and independent audits of platform content policies. Regulatory bodies, such as the **Federal Communications Commission** (FCC), would need greater power to enforce compliance. Currently, online content falls outside of the jurisdiction of the FCC, including social media. Other platforms' content, such as broadcasting television, cable, and radio, are subjected to FCC authority and its speech regulations (FCC Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau, 2021). Moving social media content under the FCC's umbrella could yield a safer online environment and reduce the risk of mass radicalization.

On the other hand, there are those that argue that excessive regulation could stifle free speech, hinder innovation, and burden smaller platforms. The greatest concerns are over what voices would be censored and who would be responsible for enforcing and regulating these platforms. Because of the lack of consensus over what a "good" or "ideal" social media platform looks like, there are no clear guidelines as to what information or posts should need to be

censored. Niam Yaraghi, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's Center of Technological Innovation, points out that at the end of the day, social media companies are private businesses and influencing what kind of information comes from their platform puts the government at risk of violating the First Amendment (Yaraghi, 2018).

Political Perspectives on this Solution

From a conservative angle, there are concerns over potential free speech infringement when it comes to increasing regulations. Conservative would prefer solutions that allow the market to freely correct the problem with limited government intervention. On the other hand, liberals are in support of enhanced regulations that would hold social media platforms accountable. Additionally, they argue that greater regulation would ensure transparency and fairness, as well as combat hate speech on these platforms. One proposed example of this type of regulation can be found in Sen. Bennet (D-CO) and Sen. Welch (D-VT)'s Digital Platform Commission Act. Under this act, a federal agency would be created to regulate digital platforms (Bennet 2023). While this bill was proposed primarily to regulate AI, its existence marks a shift in the federal government's willingness to intervene and moderate digital platforms.

Public-Private Partnerships for Research and Development

Another solution that has been proposed is fostering collaboration between the government, companies, and academic institutions. Due to the evolving nature of online extremism, the need for new technological solutions requires strong public-private relationships. Such a partnership could invest in the study of extremist content and algorithmic bias, while also creating strategies to combat harmful online movements. Public-private collaboration has occurred in other sectors as well, including Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate change, and transportation. For example, IMPACT 2030 is a private-sector coalition that aims to achieve the UN SDGs. It even hosted a summit in September 2016 to bring together UN officials and key stakeholders in private companies to achieve their goals (Global Compact, 2016).

Leveraging collective expertise and resources to develop innovative tools can effectively identify and combat extremist content. Supporters argue that promoting knowledge sharing across various sectors will lead to better technological solutions. Many would point to the success of the Human Genome Project, GPS technology, and even the Internet (Gelsinger, 2022). These projects were the result of private collaboration with federal funding.

According to Pat Gelsinger, CEO of Intel, public sector investment increases the productivity of private sector work from 15% to 45%. Critics argue that public-private partnerships could result in undue influence on government from technology companies and limit the ability of independent researchers to address critical issues. Additionally, misuse of advanced technologies that get developed in the process is another concern for those opposed to funding these partnerships.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Conservatives are typically advocates of market-based solutions and question the extent of government involvement when it comes to funding in research and development. While collaboration across sectors can help spread out a project's cost over an extended period, this does not eliminate the challenges that publicly funded projects typically face, such as cost overruns and delays (Beckers and Stegemann, 2021). Such a partnership would result in needing to increase the federal budget to cover costs, which conservatives are traditionally against. Liberals, on the other hand, have supported public-private partnerships in the past. They see it as an opportunity to leverage industry expertise and resources to counter online extremism.

Investment in Education and Digital Literacy Programs

The proliferation of extremism through social media platforms, especially among youth, can be attributed to vulnerability to extremist ideologies, misinformation, and lack of **media literacy**. Allocating resources for educational programs that promote critical thinking, digital literacy, and responsible online behavior could combat these factors. These kinds of programs can be implemented in schools, community centers, and even online. In a digital era, it is more important than ever to empower individuals with the necessary skills to help them navigate changing technological landscapes.

Supporters of these initiatives point out that these programs will equip individuals with tools to discern reliable information from misinformation to challenge extremist narratives as well as develop resiliency against online radicalization. Finland includes internet literacy education in its curriculum as early as preschool.. Finland's Minister of Science and Culture, Petri Honkonen, points out that "the point is critical thinking, and that is a skill that everybody needs more and more" (Klepper and Valdes, 2023).

The biggest concern critics have of these educational initiatives is how effective and scalable these programs would be in addressing the complexities of online extremism. Given the many other demands that teachers are already experiencing, there are concerns that adding more educational requirements to their list of obligations

Map of states participating in Media Literacy Program.
   Media Literacy Now,

could overwhelm educators. Currently less than half of US states have some kind of media literacy education required (McNeill, 2023). But even in states with requirements, there is little national coordination for the information being taught. Some states have laws mandating these programs, while others only provide recommendations and resources for educators.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

For the most part, promoting better digital literacy has been supported across party lines. New Jersey, Illinois, and Texas all recently implemented standards for teaching internet literacy. This support for media literacy programs demonstrates these programs are a bipartisan solution. However, conservatives have expressed concerns over potential biases in the content of the programming and question whether such programs could be a form of thought control. Because education is typically under the mandate of the state, not the federal government, there are concerns of federal overreach into what should be a state-led and state-mandated issue.

Support for Community-Based Interventions and Rehabilitation Programs

While many of the solutions above discuss addressing the online nature of this issue, it is important to also look at the human aspects of online extremism. Preventing radicalization is not just about cutting off the sources for extremist ideologies, but also addressing the everyday elements that makes someone more vulnerable to radicalization. According to Educate Against Hate, regardless of background, some factors of vulnerability include struggling with a sense of identity, family issues, difficulty in socialization, and low self-esteem; all things that often lead to a sense of isolation (Education Against Hate, 2021). Therefore, community-based interventions and rehabilitation programs efforts should be focused on providing mentorship, counseling, and social support networks to these individuals. This approach is holistic and aims to prevent rather than counteract, making it much more proactive. Supporters believe that providing alternatives to the extremist narratives found online in the real world will create a misalignment for those exposed. This will cause them to question or even doubt the information being presented to them. However, critics point out the challenges in identifying at-risk individuals and determining whether these programs are successful in the long-term. Because information is constantly circulating and being reinforced, there is doubt to how long the effect of these programs will hold out, as well as the constant changing circumstances that people experience daily.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Conservatives have traditionally emphasized individual responsibility and deemphasizing government intervention in leading these efforts. Rather than mandating or providing federal guidance for these programs and intervention efforts, they would advocate for private organizations or family-led initiatives to strengthen vulnerable persons from radicalization. Liberals, on the other hand, would be in support of government funding for community-based programs and believe that these organizations need federal funding help to comprehensively address the social issues and prevent radicalization of youth.

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

Preserving the fabric of our democracy and safeguarding our digital landscape demand immediate and comprehensive action.

There are significant budgetary considerations for combatting online extremism. Hiring more personnel, investing in technology to moderate content, and ensuring compliance would require additional funding for the FCC or DHS. Expanding the role of the FCC would require increasing its budget. For FY 2023, this budget was roughly $55 million (Federal Communications Commission, 2023). Additionally, the current budget of DHS is approximately $60 million (Department of Homeland Security, 2023). Other budgetary considerations include more funding for the Department of Education and participating educational institutions in the research of digital literacy and online behavior.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of extremist content through social media poses a serious challenge for Congress and the country. As online platforms become breeding grounds for radical ideologies, there is an urgent need to address this issue. Over the years, the rapid growth of social media has inadvertently allowed extremist content to spread like wildfire, connecting like-minded individuals across the globe. The echo chamber effect, coupled with algorithmic biases, amplifies these narratives, fostering a dangerous environment for the radicalization of vulnerable individuals, including youth.

Congress faces the daunting task of finding a middle ground between content moderation and safeguarding free speech. Balancing these elements is essential to prevent the spread of extremist beliefs while respecting the fundamental rights of expression. Collaborative efforts between social media companies, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies are crucial in responding effectively to this issue. However, questions about privacy and jurisdictional boundaries remain. Policymakers must explore

innovative solutions to address these biases and reinforce ethical standards that protect society from radical ideologies.

The path forward lies in combining multiple solutions, whether presented in this briefing or thought up on your own. Enhanced regulation, public-private partnerships for research and development, investment in education and digital literacy programs, and support for community-based interventions are all essential elements in tackling online extremism, but they are only a snapshot of solutions that could help counteract online extremism. As representatives, you should explore beyond this briefing to devise solutions that respond to the evolving landscape of technology and extremism.

Preserving the fabric of our democracy and safeguarding the safety of our society demand immediate and comprehensive action. As representatives, it is your responsibility to rise to the challenge, find common ground, and develop innovative approaches that protect our communities and promote a healthy online environment. Only by joining forces can you effectively counter the proliferation of extremism through social media and safeguard the principles that underpin our nation's foundation.

GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH

As you conduct further research, consult a range of sources, such as journal articles found through Google Scholar, the United Nations, independent think tanks, and news platforms. There are various commissions and organizations that have authored research reports on the inner workings of social media platforms and their algorithms. As you prepare for bill writing, work to understand not only your party's perspective, but the perspective of the other party, tech companies, legal scholars, and everyday Americans. Centering these perspectives will prove to be worthwhile.

Furthermore, familiarize yourself with existing frameworks, technological innovation, and public opinion polls on this topic. Doing so could illuminate new solutions and broaden your perspective and knowledge on the issue. Some organizations to pay attention to that are not included in this briefing include the Center for Humane Technology, the Partnership on AI, the Anti-Defamation League, and Life After Hate.

GLOSSARY

Algorithmic Bias – Systematic and repeatable errors that create unfair outcomes due to its design or the unanticipated use or decisions relating to the way data is coded to train the algorithm.

Communications Decency Act – Title V of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. This section attempted to regulate indecency and obscenity on the Internet and established that Internet services were not liable for their users' words.

Echo Chamber – An environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own beliefs.

. **Extremism** – The advocacy or support for radical political, religious, or social beliefs that often involve the use of violence to achieve desired outcomes.

Federal Communications Commission – An independent agency that regulates communications by radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable across the United States

Media Literacy – A person's ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and take action with all forms of media and an understanding of how media systems work

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