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ALT-PLATFORMIZATION: RADICALIZATION OF DISCOURSES AND INFORMATION FLOWS IN THE ALTERNATIVE ECOSYSTEM.

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Background and Objectives

This work in progress paper examines the process of radicalization on the alternative social media platform Gab, and the flow of information between Gab and other similar platforms. Corresponding to the socio-political changes and increasing polarization across the globe, some alternative platforms have witnessed a rising popularity among ultra-conservative and/or right-leaning users. Among such platforms, a few have succeeded in surviving the external pressures put on them through what van Dijck calls “deplatformisation” (Van Dijck et al., 2021). Gab, an alternative platform often equated to the far-right copy of Twitter, is one such space (Zannettou et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2019). Gab exhibits significant changes in participation and discourse. By analyzing temporal dynamics of posts on three topics—vaccination discourse, music, and food—we trace the process of radicalization on Gab. We also mapped the content from the most shared external sources (domains) across platforms such as BitChute, Odyssey, Rumble etc. to trace the flow of information across the fringe network. We argue that users are overcoming deplatforming or deplatformization by creating sustainable flows of information in a range of services and spaces, all interconnected through their platformized function. We define this as “alt-platformization”, the systemic and systematic process of creating a self-sufficient, viable alternative to the platformized web, entailing the necessary infrastructure, production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction of discourses. A key differentiating feature of alt-platformization is the ideological, along with commercial logics dominating this process and space.

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Methodology

We collected the data for this project using “garc”, “a Python library and command line tool for collecting JSON data from Gab.com” (Stevens, 2021). We collected gabs posted between May 2018 and August 2022 containing generic keywords ‘music’ (n= 27,673), ‘food’ (n=14,520), and the more controversial discourse of ‘vaccination’ (along with related keywords, n=68,441). We developed an open-source tool in-house to clean up JSON data and transform it into a relational database format (Alpert, 2021). Through a mixed-methods approach, we investigated the dynamics of conversations over time and discursive changes across the three case studies on the platform. Particularly, we compare such dynamics before the COVID-19 pandemic, and during it, to have a basis of comparison between non-acute and acute time periods. We identified the most shared domains from the posts and searched the content from these URLs on search engines and platforms such as BitChute, Odyssey, Rumble. We mapped the flows of information between these platforms and identified features or functions that are unique to these platforms, which also enable alt-platformization.

Preliminary Findings

Our analysis shows clear indicators of the radicalization of discourses across all cases. Conversations about food in 2019 are dominantly related to healthy eating, diets, cooking recipes, and the role of FDA in regulating certain foods. However, during the pandemic, such conversations become highly politicized, and keywords such as ‘MAGA’, ‘Patriots’ or ‘Trump’ enter the food discourse (Table 1).

Food							
Pre-Pandemic				During Pandemic			
Hashtags	% of Total	Domains	% of Total	Hashtags	% of Total	Domains	% of Total
news	46.01%	naturalnews.com	15.60%	news	50.77%	t.me	25.23%
health	36.25%	infowars.com	14.23%	naturalnews	11.90%	bitchute.com	8.66%
usa	32.82%	theepochtimes.com	11.87%	infowars	9.33%	rumble.com	6.07%
trump	32.39%	google.com	7.61%	usa	8.89%	youtu.be	5.69%
maga	31.66%	investmentwatchblog.com	5.56%	theepochtimes	8.64%	naturalnews.com	5.64%
cooking	30.55%	youtube.com	3.73%	china	8.30%	theepochtimes.com	4.83%
california	30.52%	breitbart.com	3.73%	cooking	8.15%	oann.com	4.08%
patriots	30.23%	kohathite.com	3.42%	trump	6.12%	zerohedge.com	3.70%
canada	29.92%	engadget.com	3.12%	coronavirus	6.07%	bit.ly	3.52%
texas	29.90%	zerohedge.com	2.89%	health	4.99%	youtube.com	3.20%
christian	29.81%	youtu.be	2.89%	newyork	4.25%	investmentwatchblog.com	2.90%
jesus	29.78%	oann.com	2.89%	foodanddrugadministration	3.95%	thegatewaypundit.com	2.47%
uk	29.49%	bit.ly	2.44%	twitter	3.85%	breitbart.com	2.34%
money	29.24%	jojorecipes.com	2.21%	iwb	3.60%	infowars.com	2.17%
joebiden	29.13%	globalresearch.ca	1.98%	investmentwatch	3.60%	blogspot.com	2.11%
covid	29.01%	lifehacker.com	1.60%	california	3.60%	bestnewshere.com	1.94%
italy	28.91%	dailycaller.com	1.45%	recipes	3.46%	dailycaller.com	1.56%
cnn	28.90%	nytimes.com	1.29%	cook	3.46%	quotulatioussness.ca	1.49%
women	28.89%	activistpost.com	1.14%	foodanddrink	3.41%	facebook.com	1.46%
foxnews	28.88%	nauankhongkho.vn	1.07%	recipe	3.36%	thehill.com	1.18%
sports	28.81%	twitter.com	0.99%	europa	3.31%	marketwatch.com	1.18%
nyc	28.70%	snopes.com	0.99%	vickibatt	3.16%	gab.com	1.13%
family	28.68%	quotulatioussness.ca	0.99%	alexjones	3.16%	globalresearch.ca	1.06%
economy	28.65%	foodiesmatblog.com	0.99%	asia	3.01%	foodnationradio.com	1.03%
london	28.53%	theunhivemind.com	0.91%	diet	2.91%	protecttheharvest.com	1.01%
mexico	28.47%	thefederalist.com	0.91%	africa	2.77%	thespectator.info	0.96%
france	28.33%	theatlantic.com	0.91%	trumpadministration	2.62%	hueoivietnamesecuisine.com	0.93%
catholic	28.25%	cryptogon.com	0.91%	tc	2.52%	dailymail.co.uk	0.86%
bible	28.24%	truepundit.com	0.84%	texas	2.42%	brighteon.com	0.83%

Table 1: Dynamics of Food Discourse on Gab

For music (Table 2), the discursive space remains almost exclusively within the domain of music in 2019, with secondary hashtags like 'WhatAreYouListeningTo', 'Rock', or '70sMusic' being top secondary hashtags. However, USA elections and the pandemic show the introduction of interdiscursive linkages that effectively radicalize the discourse, and secondary hashtags and domains see clear shifts towards more hyperpartisan politics. Hashtags such as 'Trump', 'MAGA', and 'BigPharma' are gradually introduced into conversations about music, and anti-lockdown or politically critical songs and music are widely shared. Our qualitative analysis of the contents of gabs further shows this radicalization process.

Music							
Pre-Pandemic				During Pandemic			
Hashtags	% of total	Domains	% of total	Hashtags	% of total	Domains	% of total
music	100.00%	youtube.com	59.82%	music	99.93%	youtube.com	49.13%
rock	8.14%	bitchute.com	16.58%	art	13.10%	spotify.com	13.28%
news	7.45%	theepochtimes.com	2.33%	news	11.26%	bitchute.com	8.84%
whatareyoulisteningto	6.45%	dailycaller.com	1.95%	christian	10.73%	t.me	2.72%
art	5.73%	engadget.com	1.47%	god	10.60%	mixcloud.com	2.19%
70smusic	5.08%	logosclubblog.com	1.34%	maga	10.30%	gettr.com	2.15%
christian	4.25%	soundcloud.com	1.31%	jesus	9.65%	vgebooks.com	2.06%
nature	3.06%	invidio.us	1.28%	entertainment	9.59%	rumble.com	1.93%
piano	2.97%	google.com	1.15%	trump	9.28%	fanlink.to	1.90%
60smusic	2.93%	quotulatiuousness.ca	1.02%	texas	9.12%	dlive.tv	1.26%
musicvideo	2.39%	discogs.com	0.96%	bible	9.10%	blogspot.com	1.20%
metal	2.24%	breitbart.com	0.96%	health	9.03%	soundcloud.com	1.06%
christmas	1.95%	thefederalist.com	0.86%	california	9.02%	soundclick.com	1.05%
theepochtimes	1.80%	blogspot.com	0.80%	america	9.01%	facebook.com	1.01%
entertainment	1.76%	fromthetrenchesworldreport.com	0.70%	cnn	8.90%	bandcamp.com	0.98%
video	1.71%	twitter.com	0.64%	covid	8.88%	biblethought.net	0.83%
inspirational	1.69%	hackaday.com	0.64%	money	8.77%	gab.com	0.82%
hiphop	1.69%	theatlantic.com	0.61%	joebiden	8.70%	odysee.com	0.78%
newyork	1.63%	mixcloud.com	0.61%	canada	8.66%	reverbnation.com	0.76%
synthwave	1.39%	etsy.com	0.61%	usa	8.66%	invidio.us	0.75%
alternative	1.32%	thegg.net	0.57%	women	8.62%	quotulatiuousness.ca	0.73%
thedailycaller	1.30%	wordpress.com	0.51%	investing	8.56%	apple.com	0.70%
rap	1.28%	tinyurl.com	0.48%	stocks	8.43%	publish0x.com	0.57%
live	1.28%	smarturl.it	0.48%	food	8.41%	musicapp1.com	0.54%
twitter	1.24%	bit.ly	0.48%	sports	8.38%	bit.ly	0.54%
seventiesmusic	1.24%	vimeo.com	0.41%	patriots	8.36%	smarturl.it	0.52%
history	1.17%	spotify.com	0.41%	foxnews	8.35%	anchor.fm	0.49%
gaming	1.17%	thenextweb.com	0.35%	nyc	8.33%	vibeacademy.live	0.43%
china	1.15%	oann.com	0.35%	uk	8.32%	bestnewshere.com	0.40%

Table 2: Dynamics of Music Discourse on Gab

The same process is also evident in the vaccination discourse (Table 3), which evolves as a discursive space discussing impacts of vaccines from a purely medical perspective (yet still conspiratorial), to a highly political, hyperpartisan discussion that extends far beyond a medical conversation.

Vaccines							
Pre-Pandemic				During Pandemic			
Hashtags	% of total	Domains	% of total	Hashtags	% of total	Domains	% of total
vaccines	66.02%	YouTube	14.72%	covid19	36.69%	BitChute	7.90%
vaccine	26.08%	naturalnews.com	13.77%	covid	32.83%	YouTube	5.62%
news	14.55%	infowars.com	6.94%	coronavirus	19.60%	rumble.com	3.96%
coronavirus	12.07%	Twitter	4.42%	trump	16.36%	naturalnews.com	3.02%
bigpharma	11.15%	humansarefree.com	3.79%	news	15.88%	thegatewaypundit.com	2.85%
health	10.14%	banned.video	3.05%	maga	14.19%	brighteon.com	2.59%
vaxxed	8.51%	investmentwatchblog.com	2.10%	plandemic	14.02%	reitbar.com	2.48%
naturalnews	7.51%	theepochtimes.com	2.10%	usa	12.87%	brandnewtube.com	2.41%
billgates	6.73%	lewrockwell.com	1.47%	freedom	12.29%	theepochtimes.com	2.02%
china	5.57%	bitchute.com	1.47%	agenda21	11.86%	Telegram	1.83%
autism	5.50%	Telegram	1.37%	lockdown	11.42%	childrenshealthdefense.org	1.48%
cdc	5.26%	sciencealert.com	1.37%	biden	11.28%	dailymail.co.uk	1.22%
vaccination	4.72%	theunhivemind.com	1.26%	nwo	11.26%	newstarget.com	1.14%
usa	4.02%	blog.nomorefakenews.com	0.84%	qanon	11.15%	zerohedge.com	1.12%
ethanhuff	3.56%	globalresearch.ca	0.74%	wwg1wga	10.93%	odysee.com	1.12%
science	3.56%	vk.com	0.74%	fakenews	10.85%	reitbart.com	1.12%
flu	3.41%	dailymail.co.uk	0.63%	pandemic	10.57%	lifesitenews.com	1.10%
cancer	3.41%	nytimes.com	0.63%	truth	10.08%	rt.com	0.80%
california	3.25%	zerohedge.com	0.63%	patriots	9.99%	reuters.com	0.72%
measles	3.17%	ncbi.nlm.nih.gov	0.63%	masks	9.89%	nypost.com	0.60%
mikeadams	3.10%	healthimpactnews.com	0.42%	billgates	9.62%	nationalfile.com	0.57%
who	2.94%	greenmedinfo.com	0.42%	politics	9.60%	tv.gab.com	0.55%
mmr	2.86%	nypost.com	0.42%	america	9.44%	humansarefree.com	0.52%
virus	2.86%	activistpost.com	0.32%	health	9.08%	dailyexpose.co.uk	0.51%
nwo	2.86%	brighteon.com	0.32%	q	8.71%	healthimpactnews.com	0.37%
flushot	2.79%	foxnews.com	0.32%	bigpharma	8.64%	globalresearch.ca	0.36%

Table 3: Dynamics of Vaccination Discourse on Gab

For ‘music’ and ‘food’, we identified the gabs that shared content from external sources and mapped the content outside gab to understand the flow of information. The three highest shared URLs (with over 500 posts) are either songs or Bible songs. The highest shared URL (<https://fanlink.to/jimmysaxblack>) is a link to artist Jimmy Sax Black. However, the text used in the post contain hate speech and misinformation (accompanied by hashtags such as ‘NoVaccinePassport’). Artist NiteMare’s song from soundclick.com is the 4th highest shared link (also accompanied by hashtags ‘Trump2020’, ‘MAGA’, ‘America’). The same content by NiteMare is available on BitChute and few other fringe sites. This pattern is visible in several other external URLs we examined. Platforms such as Odysee and soundclick offer download buttons that allows anyone to instantly download media file on to their system. Odysee and Bitchute allow multiple users to upload the same content without taking them down for copyright infringement. In some cases, the URLs shared on Gab were found to be suspended by the service provider; however, the content (text or video) can be found on some alternative platforms. Such affordances allow audio visual content propagating hate

speech, mis/dis information to circulate among fringe platforms, effectively bypassing deplatformization.

While platformization focuses on gathering user data and generate value for a given platform company, alt-platformization is the process in which user community is using platforms to extend their ideological networks or discourses. In a platformized web, platform features are decentralized into the web, platform-ready data is gathered from the web and recentralized in the platform, to generate value from user data (Helmond, 2015, p. 124) and monetize the data (Helmond, 2015, p. 101). Whereas in an alt-platformized web, the economics and logics allow users to participate on several platforms to extend decentralized networks. This provides a sustainable environment for a discourse to exist and develop (or in current case radicalize).

Next Steps

Our preliminary findings show indications of how even non-political discourses can become radicalized, further feeding into the problematic political discussions on alternative platforms like Gab. In the next steps, we will expand the forensic tracking of domains and URLs, and also deepen the qualitative, discourse-analytical stage of the study, in order to map both information flows and discursive strategies and nodal points of these discursive networks. This will allow us to expand the theoretical construct of 'alt-platformization', and provide a framework for understanding and tackling radicalization online.

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