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PATHWAYS TO RADICALISM: EXAMINING ONLINE COMMUNITY AND POLITICAL PATHWAYS TO MORE RADICAL BELIEFS ON REDDIT

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Introduction

Political radicalization threatens democracy, and violent radicals often point to radical online communities as motivating their behavior. Researchers have sought to understand online exposure to radicalism through structural mechanisms like algorithms but have not found strong evidence of their influence (Ledwich & Zaitsev, 2019; Nelson & Webster, 2017). At the same time, models of offline radicalization emphasize the importance of personal motivations like the desire for significance and community but do not fully account for online contexts (King & Taylor, 2011; Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

We integrate these approaches, which are both interested in early-stage radicalization processes, to better understand how people's desire for significance impacts their potential for exposure to radical beliefs and communities online, self-perceptions of these processes, and perceptions of radicalization itself. Through interviews with politically active Reddit users who participate in mainstream and fringe subreddits, we ask: RQ1) What are the pathways to radical content and communities online? and RQ2) What are the perceptions of radicalization in online communities?

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Method

This paper reports the findings from 27 semi-structured phone interviews with participants who engage with mainstream and fringe political communities on Reddit, conducted between January and September 2021. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling based on their activity on liberal, conservative, and fringe political subreddits. Participants responded to a range of questions about their political media consumption and relationship with radicalization processes, such as how they became interested in Reddit, the nature of their participation on Reddit, and their perceptions of extreme political beliefs and behaviors on and off the platform. The data were analyzed using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We report four themes below, using them to propose new theoretical insights about political radicalization.

Findings

Political Disillusionment Offline; Incidental Exposure to Politics Online

Participants cited dissatisfaction with the ‘biased’ mainstream media, party politics/polarization, and the inability to engage in productive discussions offline as one reason for their Reddit use. For participants, mainstream media has become too biased, editorialized, and sensationalized. Politics is now a ‘team sport’ where there are winners and losers and few options for collective progress. Many participants felt unrepresented by the two-party system. This mismatch between the perception of others’ staunch party alignment and participants’ nuanced views made them generally disappointed with the nature and quality of their offline political discussions. Meanwhile, participants were already participating in non-political communities on Reddit, where they were gradually exposed to political content and communities. This political disillusionment offline, coupled with casual encounters with Reddit, led to a range of political engagement on the platform—from lurking on general political subreddits (e.g., r/politics) to actively participating in fringe communities (e.g., r/Conspiracy, r/AccidentallyCommunist, r/Anarco_Capitalism, r/Qult_Headquarters).

Reddit for ‘Earnest’ and ‘Non-Partisan’ Discussions

Participants saw Reddit as a conducive platform for “earnest,” productive, and non-partisan discussions. Participants reported engaging with a variety of mainstream and fringe subreddits—some aligned with their political views and some not—to interact with a spectrum of ideas and better understand why people believe what they do. Participants expressed coming to these discussions in good faith—being genuinely confused or fascinated by a viewpoint and open to new ideas. Having these nuanced discussions with un(or under)-represented political arrangements on Reddit allowed participants to reject party politics and actualize a core value: developing “informed” political opinions based on evidence and debate.

Reddit as Radical Space; Unaffected Participants

Participants were quick to blame partisan polarization for the problems in American politics. However, when asked if their beliefs had become more extreme or radical over time, due to either their Reddit use or other factors, participants overwhelmingly said their political beliefs were unchanged. In fact, some indicated moving to more centrist beliefs because of their thoughtful discussions on Reddit. Conversely, participants said they observed other Redditors becoming more extreme in their beliefs and discourses online. Undergirding this discrepancy was a perception of intellectual superiority. Participants described themselves as “self-reliant,” “hyper-logical,” “hyper-rational,” and thus incapable of being influenced by fringe beliefs. Although some participants actively engaged on extreme or fringe subreddits, many said they understood social media platforms for what they are, both good and bad, and therefore were insulated from radicalization on Reddit.

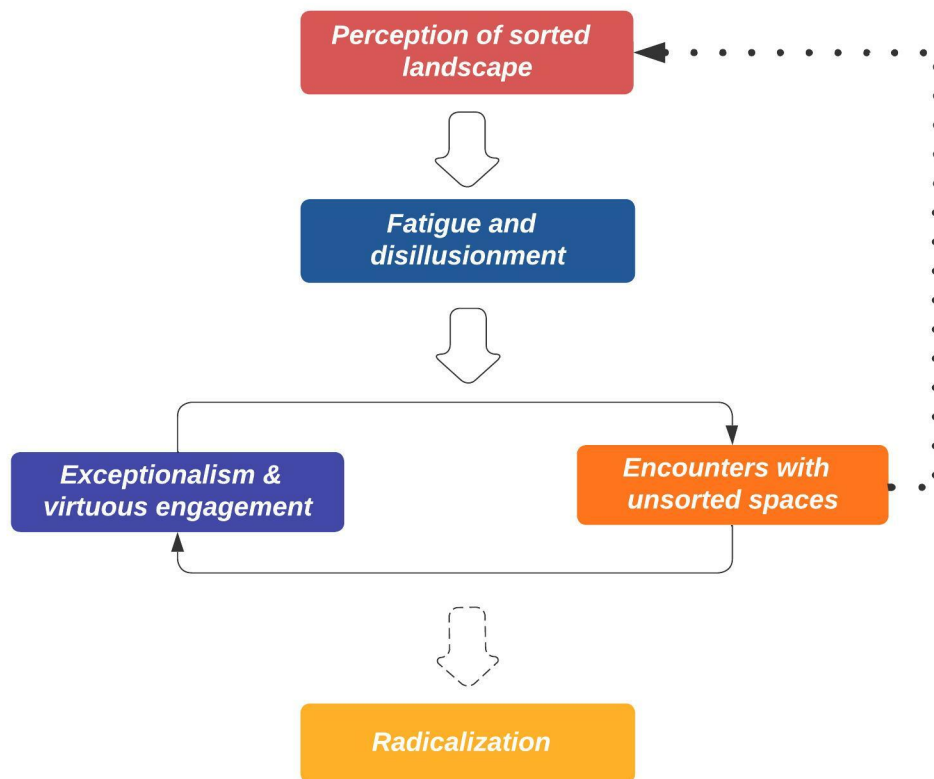
Virtuous Participation to Prevent Radicalization

Not only did many participants feel immune to radicalization, but they perceived their Reddit participation as necessary to *prevent* radicalization and partisan polarization. This virtuous participation involved asking questions, “poking holes” in arguments (for which some participants were banned), providing peer-reviewed research, and direct messaging fellow Redditors to facilitate conversations in less public spaces. Participants believed they were uniquely capable of engaging in productive dialogue because they possessed the appropriate temperament and were more educated on political issues than the average user.

Conclusion

This study provides important insight into the media and social/psychological pathways that could lead to encounters with radical content and communities online. We argue the above insights are potentially indicative of a new model of radicalization. This model, titled “Unsorting the Self,” reflects individual progression to politically radical communities and viewpoints and is composed of four stages: 1) perceiving a politically sorted landscape, 2) political fatigue and disillusionment, 3) the search for political exceptionalism coinciding with encounters with unsorted spaces, and, 4) political radicalization.

Figure 1: Unsorting the Self and Radicalization



Both offline and online, participants perceived less room for arrangements of political beliefs that did not fit neatly into partisan categories or were not “down the line” Republican or Democrat. This led to overall fatigue with 1) political discourse among friends/family, 2) “biased” or unnuanced political media, and 3) political polarization itself as a process that has corrupted both personal networks and mainstream media as sources of political engagement and information. This fatigue often led to self-sustaining cycles of encounters with unsorted online spaces, like those found on Reddit, followed by virtuous participation in ways that cultivate feelings of exceptionalism. Although this process was commonly expressed as a source of political invigoration for participants, we argue this potentially represents an important *initial* step into more radical political communities—and one that people may not see as risky because they view themselves as participating in order to help others and are therefore immune to radicalization.

Collectively, the “Unsorting the Self” model offers a new framework for studying radicalization on online platforms like Reddit that addresses gaps in current understandings of political radicalization and the role of online communities.

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