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The impact of deplatforming the far right: an analysis of YouTube and BitChute

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ABSTRACT

The content moderation practice of deplatforming, i.e., the removal of undesired actors, has become common on social media platforms such as YouTube. Our study aims to examine the impact of deplatforming on prominent far-right channels on YouTube. In our study, we are particularly interested in the deplatforming of prominent far-right channels such as Alex Jones, James Allsup, or Red Ice TV to understand the impact deplatforming has on them. To do so, we analyze two datasets: We check whether 11,198 YouTube channels have been removed in 22 months between 2018 and 2019 and for what reason. We then focus on the far right and check whether the deplatformed far-right channels have found a new home on the alternative video platform BitChute. The time frame for this study includes the removal of some critically important far-right figures. Our analysis shows that deplatforming effectively minimizes the reach of disinformation and extreme speech, as alternative platforms allowing this kind of content cannot mitigate the negative effect of being deplatformed on YouTube.

Disinformation and social media are in the public spotlight, and there is a trove of research on misinformation, disinformation, or 'fake news' in the political context. Questions about how to deal with such content and the actors disseminating it are usually discussed in the context of content moderation (Gillespie, 2018; Roberts, 2019). However, comparatively little research has been conducted on actions aimed at curbing misinformation or extreme speech (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017) on social media platforms and their effect by removing those actors altogether. Our paper focuses on YouTube and removing problematic channel creators from the platform, occasionally referred to as 'deplatforming' (Rogers, 2020). While the term 'deplatforming' started on the US right-wing and seemed to have taken off after Alex Jones' ban from several platforms, including YouTube and Facebook, in 2018, more recently, academics have taken up the framing to conceptualize and analyze the effects of removing problematic actors from a platform (Ali et al., 2021; Innes & Innes, 2021; Jhaver et al., 2021; Rogers, 2020).

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In one of the studies that estimated the effect of content moderation on Reddit, Chandrasekharan et al. (2017) showed that banning hateful subreddits had decreased extreme speech usage across the platform; a finding that was also observed on Twitter (Jhaver et al., 2021). However, as Jardine (2019) points out in his analysis, malicious content creators strategically react to deplatforming and move their content to alternative platforms that are harder to control or even the Dark Web. These finding that deplatformed actors might radicalize on alternative platforms is echoed in studies by Ribeiro et al. (2021) and Ali et al. (2021). Several studies have pointed out how deplatformed users migrate to Telegram to mitigate the effects of deplatforming (Fielitz & Schwarz, 2020; Rogers, 2020; Urman & Katz, 2022). Nevertheless, neither Telegram, Reddit nor Twitter are direct replacements for content-creator based video platforms like YouTube. Furthermore, our study extends existing research on the potential effects of deplatforming by utilizing content-level metrics for a more precise estimate, as opposed to channel-level metrics (e.g., Fielitz & Schwarz, 2020; Guhl et al., 2020; Rogers, 2020).

In the case studies of Innes and Innes (2021), the video streaming platform BitChute was mentioned as an alternative used by conspiracy theorists after they were deplatformed from Facebook. We are thus interested in the effect of deplatforming as a specific form of content moderation on content creators and whether deplatformed creators can mitigate this effect with a presence on alternative social media platforms.

In our study, we are particularly interested in the deplatforming of far-right channels – i.e., channels that are prone to spreading extreme speech, such as Holocaust denial – to understand the impact this measure has, both on YouTube and the alternative video platform BitChute. BitChute is a YouTube-inspired video-hosting site founded around fostering freedom of speech (Trujillo et al., 2020). This inherently attracts far-right actors who are always looking for new platforms to publish their content (Donovan et al., 2019; Urman & Katz, 2022).

This paper is structured as follows: We will first discuss content moderation in general and then introduce deplatforming as a specific form of content moderation before we briefly discuss the role of alternative platforms for the far right on the internet. Then, in our empirical analysis, we show which channels are mainly targeted by YouTube, analyze the reasons YouTube listed for deleting them, and test whether deplatformed far-right channels can keep their audiences when they move to the alternative video streaming platform BitChute. Finally, we will discuss the impact of deplatforming on the three prominent cases of Alex Jones, James Allsup, and Red Ice TV. The time frame covered in this study was chosen as it includes the removal of some crucial right-wing figures.

Content moderation and deplatforming

Content moderation is one of the most publicly contested policy issues regarding social media platforms and has been analyzed so far from different perspectives. Scholars have, for example, focused on the regulatory dimension (Gorwa, 2019), the labor behind (Roberts, 2019), or the effects of content moderation on user behavior (Ali et al., 2021). The topic of content moderation inherently asks how content should be regulated online and by whom. First and foremost, it is essential to note that all platforms moderate in one way or the other (Gillespie, 2018). Indeed, that is why Gillespie (2018, p. 13) concludes that 'moderation is, in many ways, the commodity that platforms offer.'

Alternative platforms like BitChute, for example, will often pretend like they are not moderating their content. Still, it is essential to note that they are (e.g., in the context of pornography).[1] For Roberts (2019, p. 33), 'commercial content moderation is the organized practice of screening user-generated content posted to internet sites, social media, and other online outlets.' This definition thus highlights the importance of content moderation as an institutionalized layer between what users post and see. Moreover, while social media companies will often have specific secret rules about how to deal with what type of content, Myers West (2018) shows that users create 'folk tales' around their experiences on the platforms.

To understand the difference between types of content moderation, we follow Klonick's (2018) differentiation between ex-ante and ex-post moderation. Ex-ante is, generally speaking, done algorithmically to weed out illegal content before it even hits the platform. However, as Klonick notes, most of the moderation is done ex-post and a good amount of that manually, either proactive or reactive. Proactive ex-post moderation is, for example, the active search for terrorist content on a platform to remove it. In contrast, reactive ex-post moderation describes when platforms react to a user report, e.g., due to harassment (Klonick, 2018). Platforms have, then, different options of how to respond to the violation of their rules (often referred to as community guidelines), ranging from labeling misinformation with a fact-check (like Twitter or Facebook did during the 2020 US election), handing out strikes (e.g., YouTube will remove channels if they accumulate a certain number of strikes), shadowbanning a user (e.g., Reddit used to give users the impression that they were actively contributing to the discussion, except that only moderators but not users were able to see their comments), downranking content, endorsing trusted content, banning users for a specific amount of time (as Facebook recently introduced as a response to Donald Trump's ban from the platform), to outright removal from the platform (often referred to as 'deplatforming'; a practice which can affect an individual user, a piece of content, but also several communities at once; Ali et al., 2021).

As stated above, the label 'deplatforming' or 'de-platforming' typically refers to removing users that violated the terms of service on a given social media platform. In this sense, deplatforming is closely tied to the issue of social media governance. Moreover, while deplatforming is evoked chiefly in the context of removing far-right actors on social media, deplatforming rose in popularity when social media platforms struggled to come up with solutions to fighting the Islamic State (IS). However, deplatforming IS was less controversial than deplatforming far-right groups because there was an international consensus that it is legitimate to take action against terrorist groups such as IS (Yu, 2018).

The first significant action to remove far-right communities due to extreme speech was Reddit's removal of several subreddits in 2015. However, perhaps the most famous deplatforming was conducted by YouTube when it removed Alex Jones's channel, the owner of Infowars, in 2018. With over 2.4 million subscribers, Alex Jones of Infowars was one of the most popular political YouTube channels. Jones spread conspiracy theories in his videos, called mass shooting hoaxes, and spread extreme far-right talking points. When his channel was eventually removed, Jones claimed the ban would not weaken but strengthen him (Nicas, 2018). This idea is not far-fetched: when platforms removed 'alt-right' groups and content in the aftermath of the Unite the Right Rally in

2017, it triggered a new wave of coverage (Donovan & Boyd, 2019). This, too, was echoed academically in the context of the supply and demand model, which posits that users are going where the content is (Munger & Phillips, 2020).

While members from the right to far right often claim that they are being unfairly censored, it is often more complicated. Republicans, right-wing media outlets, and members of the far right were pushing disinformation around 'mail-in voter fraud' (Benkler et al., 2020), which tied in with the 'Stop the Steal' campaign which led, eventually, to the deadly January 6 insurrection (Bentzen, 2021). Extreme speech and disinformation in the US are often associated with the far right (e.g., Benkler et al., 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018) and thus put the far right inherently in the spotlight of content moderators. For example, in an analysis of YouTube comments, Jiang et al. (2019, p. 278) did not find 'evidence to support claims of political bias' in content moderation. Then, calling deplatforming censorship is often more a rhetorical weapon to avoid acknowledging the spread of disinformation, racism, or other extreme speech than an accurate and honest analysis.

However, once far-right content creators such as Alex Jones, Milo Yiannopolous, Laura Loomer, Martin Sellner, or Stefan Molyneux (Lewis, 2018) are deplatformed from social media platforms, they still have potential substitutes: be it alternative platforms such as BitChute (Innes & Innes, 2021; Trujillo et al., 2020), the social media site Gab (Zhou et al., 2019), or the messaging apps Discord and Telegram (Rogers, 2020; Urman & Katz, 2022).

Moreover, deplatforming might come with additional risks: 'When deplatformed social media celebrities migrate to alternative platforms, these sites are given a boost through media attention and increases in user counts' (Rogers, 2020, p. 2). These concerns have also been raised by Aswad (2018), who warns more generally that deplatforming measures can have unintended negative consequences, such as raising the profile of deplatformized actors. The strong public attention that deplatforming might cause could potentially translate to an increase in views. This phenomenon has been described in the literature before as a so-called 'Streisand effect' (Innes & Innes, 2021). Furthermore, it even might contribute to a group's radicalization (Rogers, 2020). This, too, is echoed by Ali et al. (2021), who highlight that deplatformed users got more toxic on Gab as well as Ribeiro et al. (2021), who show in the context of Reddit after the deplatforming users became more toxic on the alternative platform thedonald. Yet, little is known about the impact of deplatforming and how many people follow the deplatformed content creators to new alternative platforms. In this paper, we are thus interested in quantifying the removal of far-right channels on the one hand and their success on BitChute on the other.

Alternative platforms

When far-right actors get removed from social media platforms they often are prepared, e.g., by having accounts on multiple platforms to curb any potential deplatforming effect on their audience reach. Trujillo et al. (2020) found in their study of BitChute that most channels were also present on YouTube. As Donovan et al. (2019) highlight, the far right is dependent on commercial social media platforms and alternative platforms. Borrowing from Fraser's (1990, p. 68) counterpublic theory, we can understand alternative platforms

as 'spaces of withdrawal and regroupment' that are aimed at the formation of a collective identity, while the mainstream social media platforms are 'training grounds for agitational activities' that are aimed at reaching the mainstream (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). Mainstream platforms are thus critical for agenda-setting, while alternative platforms are necessary for forming and keeping a collective identity.

Due to their reach, mainstream platforms remain the first choice for the far right as they are the most convenient option, allowing them to maximize their content's impact and offering them agenda-setting power (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). Therefore, these platforms help the far right increase their outward-oriented communication directed to a broader public (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018). Since the far right is embedded in a broader information and entertainment ecosystem with their channels on YouTube, they can potentially recruit new people, set the agenda, or communicate alternative framings about current events. Furthermore, accounts can be opened in a couple of minutes – few resources must be invested to use the platform. However, the most significant disadvantage for far-right actors that promote extreme standpoints and spread disinformation is that there is always the danger of deplatforming. Companies frequently change and adapt their policies (or at least their interpretations; Gorwa, 2019). The far right, of course, expects and communicates the risk of deplatforming and reacts in two ways. First, using the incidents to increase their sense of victimhood (Jhaver et al., 2021). Second, by moving to a different platform that has similar features – e.g., move from Twitter to the alternative platform Gab (Zhou et al., 2019).

Therefore, alternative platforms have two functions: a) function as a backup for when the main channel gets removed, and b) sustain the core community that stays loyal to the deplatformed content creator and further contributes to the community's identity formation. As Rogers (2020) and others have highlighted, the second aspect can be considered especially risky. If language and arguments become too extreme, they can potentially lead to radicalization (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). For example, a terrorist attack on a synagogue in Pittsburgh, USA, in 2018 was conducted by a man who had announced the act on the far-right platform Gab (McIlroy-Young & Anderson, 2019). At the same time, language and arguments that are too extreme might deter users who made the jump from mainstream to alternative platforms. Deplatformed content creators must be careful about how radical they show themselves on alternative platforms because they need these users to continue promoting the content and talking points on the mainstream platforms and because alternative platforms are not immune to outside forces. In 2018, for example, Gab was forced by its hosting provider Microsoft to remove two anti-Semitic posts (BBC News, 2018).

Similarly, far-right crowdfunding sites like Hatreon or Freestartr were shut down by pressure from financial institutions like Visa, Paypal, or Stripe. Finally, after celebrating the killing of a counter-protester at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, USA, the neo-Nazi blog Daily Stormer was, for some time, only available through Tor because most hosting providers denied the Daily Stormer their service (Robertson, 2017). This, in a way, responds to Jardine's (2019) 'surface-to-Dark Web content cycle.'

In sum, for many content creators, alternative platforms are the only way forward when faced with deplatforming from mainstream platforms. In this sense, the alternative platforms offer content creators and their user base a place to regroup and strengthen their collective identity. However, this comes with risks. Firstly, the reach is limited,

and having an impact is thus much more challenging. Secondly, the lack of potential new users and counter-speech in the community might contribute to its radicalization, which, in turn, might alienate some users while pushing others towards extremist behavior. Thirdly, even on alternative platforms, users are at the platform's whim and can face deplatforming, or the platform itself might get deplatformed (e.g., get dropped by its hosting company) as was the case with Parler after the January 6 insurrection in the US.

BitChute as alternative video streaming

This study focuses on the alternative video streaming platform BitChute because the platform is often used and mentioned as a badge of honor in far-right circles. For example, the far-right YouTuber Styxhexenhammer666 has a BitChute award that he received for surpassing more than 10,000 subscribers hanging in the background of many of his videos on YouTube and BitChute. As he proudly announced in a YouTube video, he was the first BitChute user to do so. The alternative video platform profited from the so-called YouTube 'purge,' which started at the beginning of 2018 when many far-right channels faced suspension on YouTube. BitChute founder Ray Vahey claimed in an interview that they had 175,000 unique users per day in March 2018 due to the 'purge.'[2] That number does not sound impressive compared to YouTube's statistics of over 2 billion monthly users. However, in some instances, BitChute becomes relevant and attracts traffic. We compared the videos posted by Styxhexenhammer666 on YouTube and BitChute. Very few of his videos are only available on BitChute. In one of these videos, Styxhexenhammer666 has a call to action. YouTube took down one of his videos ('The Covington Catholic High School Students Did Nothing Wrong') about the Covington High School students who encountered a Native American elder in January 2019 in Washington, DC, USA. He asks his supporters to address YouTube on Twitter to restore the video directly. Eventually, the video was made available on YouTube again. Still, it is one of the few videos that received more views on BitChute (31.5k views at the time of writing) than on YouTube (27.8k views). However, in 2019, Styxhexenhammer666's other videos on BitChute received, on average, only 1.5k views. These cases illustrate the potential of BitChute to be an alternative for far-right actors if their videos or channels are deleted on YouTube.

In their study on BitChute, Trujillo et al. (2020) found that while few channels garner any relevant engagement, all of those channels are full of extreme speech. Furthermore, the authors compare the amount of extreme speech on BitChute with other alternative platforms like Gab and 4chan and find that BitChute has more extreme speech than Gab but less than 4chan. In our study, we build on Trujillo et al.'s (2020) as well as Rogers's (2020) work by analyzing whether the anecdotal evidence about the potential of BitChute to mitigate the adverse effects of deplatforming on YouTube far-right content creators can also be confirmed in a more systematic analysis.

Research questions

While this paper is focused on far-right channels, we first have to establish a baseline of removed channels for YouTube beyond the political context. We are interested in whether YouTube's channel removals follow a pattern and why channels got removed.

Although we want to focus on far-right channels, there are still different reasons why a channel can get removed, such as copyright infringement or extreme speech (YouTube calls it 'hate speech'). Answering this research question allows us to discuss whether YouTube's content moderation targets explicitly specific issues. Our first research question thus focuses on the platform's perspective and how they try to moderate content.

> *RQ1*: What are the reasons for content moderation on YouTube for different sets of channels?

Finally, we focus on the far-right channels that have been removed by YouTube and that have an active channel on the alternative platform BitChute. We have decided to focus on BitChute because the platform is, with regard to the affordances and platform architecture, a substitute for YouTube and hosts heavily promoted content creators such as Alex Jones. Furthermore, Rogers (2020) has identified BitChute as one of the most central platforms for users deplatformed by mainstream platforms. Trujillo et al. (2020) show that many BitChute channel owners also have a YouTube channel. Yet, as we discussed above, deplatforming political channels might have risks. We are thus interested in the temporal dimension and whether deplatformed users can migrate together with their audience to a new alternative platform.

> *H1:* Deplatformed content creators cannot keep the same audience reach on alternative social media platforms, namely the video streaming platform BitChute.

> *H2:* Deplatforming on YouTube leads to an increase in view numbers on BitChute.

Data and methods

Studying deplatforming and its effects are challenging for several reasons: Firstly, when a platform removes a channel/user/etc., the now-historic data is gone as well; i.e., researchers cannot analyze a channel *after* its removal but instead have to anticipate it. Secondly, this means that researchers have to collect data at scale without knowing whether it will pay off, an act that is often curtailed and/or limited by API restrictions and an ever-changing platform ecosystem that might render the data outdated. Finally, to study the impact of deplatforming, researchers also need to identify the platform that the deplatformed actors are currently using as a substitute. For our analysis, we thus rely on two connected data sets.

We analyzed 11,198 predominantly U.S. channels for 22 months to answer our first research question. These channels were identified in a prior study in which we collected mainstream and political channels to analyze how they are connected through YouTube's now-disabled channel recommendation algorithm (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2020). Our sampling in the prior study is based on the US's most popular 250 mainstream channels. We also created a list of prominent far-right and far-left organizations and individuals based on existing academic literature (e.g., Caiani et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2005) and lists (e.g., Southern Poverty Law Center). Additionally, we used the channels of American political parties and politicians, including Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, and the Green Party. Based on these source channels, we followed YouTube's channel recommendations for three steps, resulting in 11,198 channels. This analysis was conducted in January 2018. It is important to note that these channels were not limited to the far-

right or political channels, but also consisted of music, sports, gaming, etc. This allowed us to identify differences between groups of channels. The channel groups are based on YouTube's channel recommendation and were identified with an implementation of Traag's (2015) community detection algorithm. The information for the channels was downloaded via the YouTube API in January 2018. This allowed us to check again over YouTube's API in October 2019, so 22 months later, whether these channels still existed. To understand the reasons for channel terminations, we created a web scraper that directly accessed the channel's page and then collected YouTube's official reason for removal at the end of 2019. YouTube lists, in most cases, particular reasons such as copyright infringement, hate speech, or nudity. This allows us to associate groups of channels with removal reasons.

To test the two hypotheses, we use a list of 516 manually selected US channels that belong to the broader far-right YouTube ecosystem. The lists consist of 314 channels that we identified and verified in January 2018 (e.g., 220 far-right political, 16 Manosphere, 10 religious right channels; Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2020), as well as 202 manually identified channels that were part of our source channel list in the prior study but were not covered by the snowball sampling because these channels had turned off the channel recommendation for their channels (e.g., the KKK). This was well before YouTube started its efforts to fight 'hate speech' and promote more authoritative voices. We downloaded information about the videos published by these 516 channels between the beginning of 2015 and the beginning of 2018. We thus downloaded the video information for these channels before they were deplatformed. For the YouTube channels that no longer existed in 2019, we manually checked whether they had an existing account on the alternative video platform BitChute in late 2019. We could find a BitChute channel for 20 of the deplatformed YouTube channels. We then created a web scraper that fetched the information for all videos published by these channels on BitChute (20,935 videos). For our first hypothesis, this allowed us to compare the number of views of the videos identified on YouTube (30,413 videos) with the number of views of the videos identified on BitChute and thus test whether the removed channels could keep or even increase their audience reach. We also manually identified the date on which each channel was deplatformed. We used that information for our second hypothesis to test whether our results are robust and to check whether the deplatforming on YouTube leads to a temporal increase of views on BitChute. Our models were estimated in R with brms as Bayesian models for both hypotheses.[3]

Results

To answer our first research question, we analyzed all 11,198 YouTube channels. Our analysis shows that 5.6% of the channels no longer exist. Furthermore, we checked the specific deletion rate for the specific groups of channels. Groups of political channels such as *far-right & politics, far-left & militarists* or *German-language far-right* show the highest deletion rate, whereas *education/science* or *motor/cars* have a meager deletion rate (see Figure 1). Channels focusing on *music* or *hip-hop* also show a comparatively high deletion rate, in addition to political channels.

Furthermore, we looked at the removal reasons YouTube gives when visiting a removed channel's page (Figure 2). Overall, we could identify 15 unique messages. Besides two generic messages ('channel does not exist' and 'channel is not available')
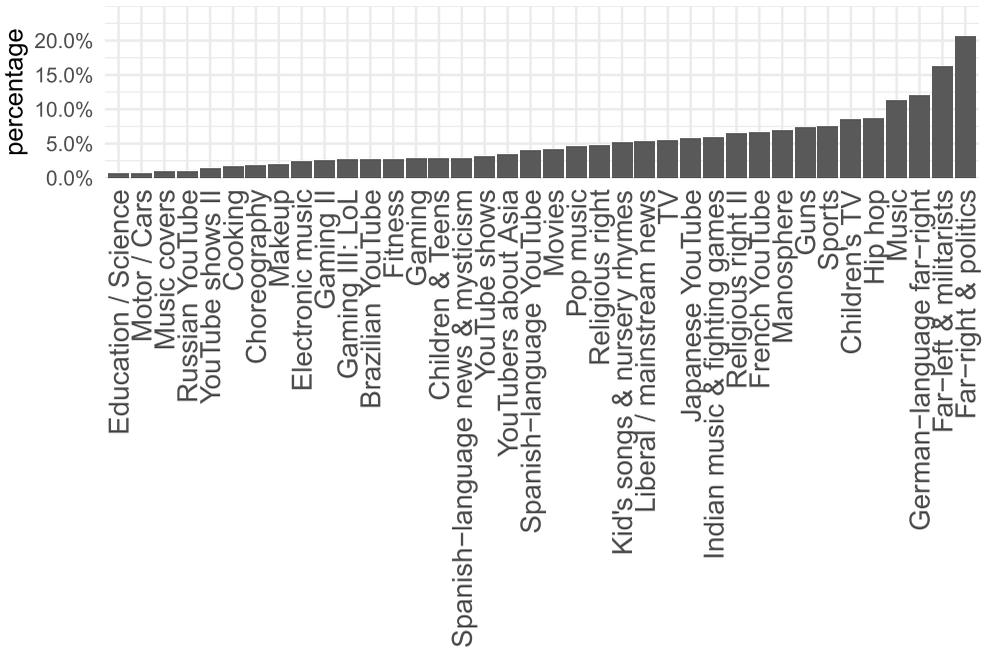
Figure 1. Groups of channels ordered by deletion rate (shown in percentage).

that also can indicate temporary bans or channels that were deliberately closed by the channel owners, all messages indicate that the channel has been terminated by YouTube Copyright infringement (25%), as well as hate speech (18%), are the most common reasons besides the generic *does not exist* (19%) message. When we add our groups of channels to the analysis, we see that the deletion reason is not independent of the channel group (chi-square = 978.96, df = 518, $p < .001$; see Figure 3). Copyright infringement and violations of YouTube's Terms of Service (ToS) were the main reasons for the removal of non-political channels. However, political channels, especially far-right channels, have a higher rate of violations against YouTube's policy prohibiting extreme speech, thus indicating that YouTube's policy changes directly affected the far-right community on YouTube (see Figures 1 and 3).

We then checked which of the removed channels also had a presence on BitChute. More specifically, we analyzed 516 far-right channels that we identified based on our prior study and manually added far-right channels that were not part of the analysis. We chose these channels because they can be considered far-right, while some channels in the overarching far-right and politics community are less extreme (e.g., Fox News, Fox Business, The Daily Wire). For example, the religious far-right channels and some channels from the Manosphere (Marwick & Caplan, 2018) also belong to the more extreme far-right ecosystem on YouTube (Lewis, 2018). For these 516 channels, we collected the metadata for a comprehensive comparison between YouTube and BitChute. Our first finding is that whereas the deletion rate for far-right channels in our first dataset was 20%, the deletion rate for our list of 516 channels is 22%.[4] Of the 111 channels that got deplatformed, only 20 channels, i.e., 18%, also have a BitChute presence. We then focused on the 20 channels that had a YouTube account at the beginning of
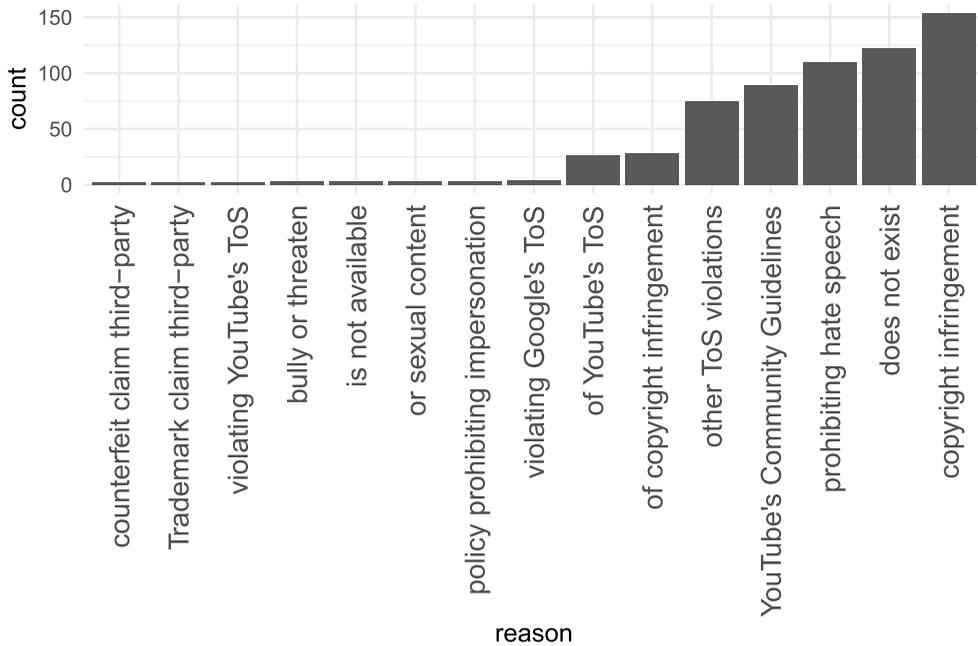
Figure 2. Deletion reasons for n = 626 channels. Short labels are used for the different messages. Some messages were quite similar. E.g., 'copyright infringement' ('This account has been terminated because we received multiple third-party claims of copyright infringement regarding material the user posted.') and 'of copyright infringement' ('This account has been terminated because it is linked to an account that received multiple third-party claims of copyright infringement.')
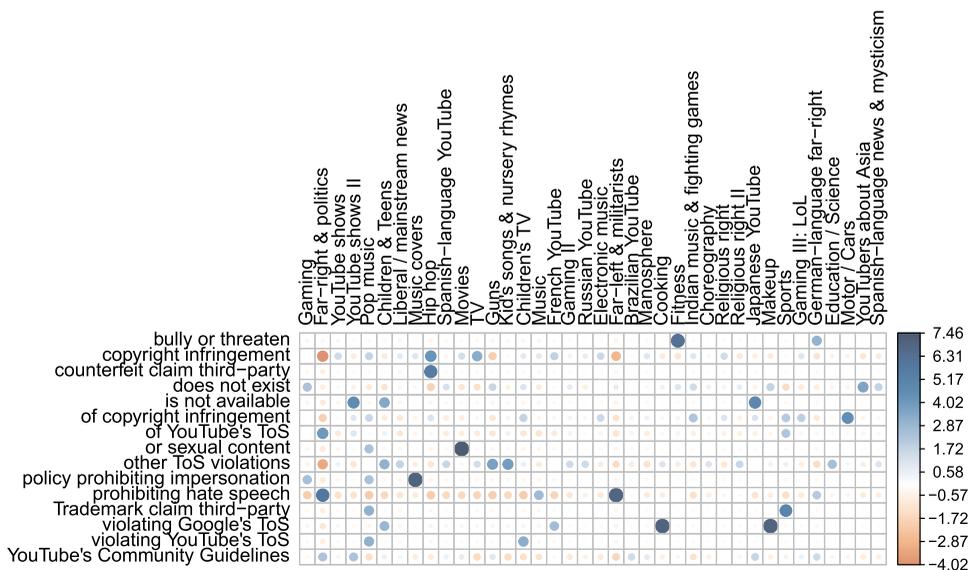

Figure 3. Channel groups and deletion reasons. Standardized residuals (shows which cells are contributing the most to the chi-square value) are visualized (chi-square = 978.96, df = 518, p < .001).

Table 1. Results of the Bayesian negative binomial regression with varying intercepts and slopes. The dependent variable is the number of views. Incidence Rate Ratios are shown for the predictors with 95% credible intervals in brackets.

Predictors	Full data set	Deplatformed reduced
Intercept	492.75 (267.74–915.99)	665.14 (281.46–1495.18)
Platform (YT = 1)	19.49 (10.59–36.60)	14.30 (5.93–32.79)
N videos	51348	44089
N channels	20	20
Bayes R^2	0.08	0.07

2018, were then deplatformed, and had a BitChute account at the end of 2019. To evaluate the effect of deplatforming, we used the YouTube or BitChute platform as a binary predictor for the number of views a video received. As we compare channels with different engagement levels, we have to use a multilevel model with videos as units of analysis that are nested within a channel. We thus estimated a model with varying slopes and intercepts for the channels. As the number of views is a count variable, we used a Bayesian negative binomial regression.

Our analysis shows that there is an apparent overall population effect concerning the platform. YouTube videos are expected to receive 19.49 times more views on average than BitChute videos (see Table 1). We also checked whether we receive the same results if we only considered BitChute videos published after a user was deplatformed. While the difference is slightly lower, our model shows that YouTube videos are expected to receive 14.30 times more views than BitChute videos (see Table 1). Furthermore, this result also holds on an individual level for each channel. With our varying effect model, we can predict the number of views for every individual channel. All channels have, on average more views on YouTube than on BitChute (Figure 4). While the drop in views is small for channels that received comparatively few views on YouTube, channels with a large audience on YouTube have a very steep decline in views on BitChute.

Our statistical analysis of comparing the YouTube videos published before the deplatforming shows that BitChute cannot mitigate the negative effect of deplatforming for channels such as Alex Jones' Infowars. The videos from deplatformed channels get substantially fewer views on BitChute than before on YouTube. Famous former YouTubers such as *James Allsup* (YouTube *Mdn* = 151,903; BitChute *Mdn* = 6,885) or *Alex Jones* (YouTube *Mdn* = 56,620; BitChute *Mdn* = 662) were strongly affected by the deplatforming, whereas small channels like *covenantpeople* (YouTube *Mdn* = 154; BitChute *Mdn* = 107) or *Alt-Right Crusaders* (YouTube *Mdn* = 4,322; BitChute *Mdn* = 1,057) were less affected (see Figure 4).

To get a sense of the impact of deplatforming on individual channels, we are looking at the three most popular channels in our far-right sample of deplatformed channels: Alex Jones, James Allsup, and Red Ice TV. We are particularly interested in whether the channels were prepared for their deplatforming, how the channel owners reacted to their deplatforming and the potential differences between their YouTube and BitChute videos.

The Alex Jones Channel: In August 2018, YouTube deplatformed Alex Jones, the owner and founder of the far-right conspiracy media outlet Infowars. At that time, the channel had over 2.4 million subscribers and was at the heart of the far-right YouTube community. In February 2018, the Infowars channel on BitChute went live. Since then,
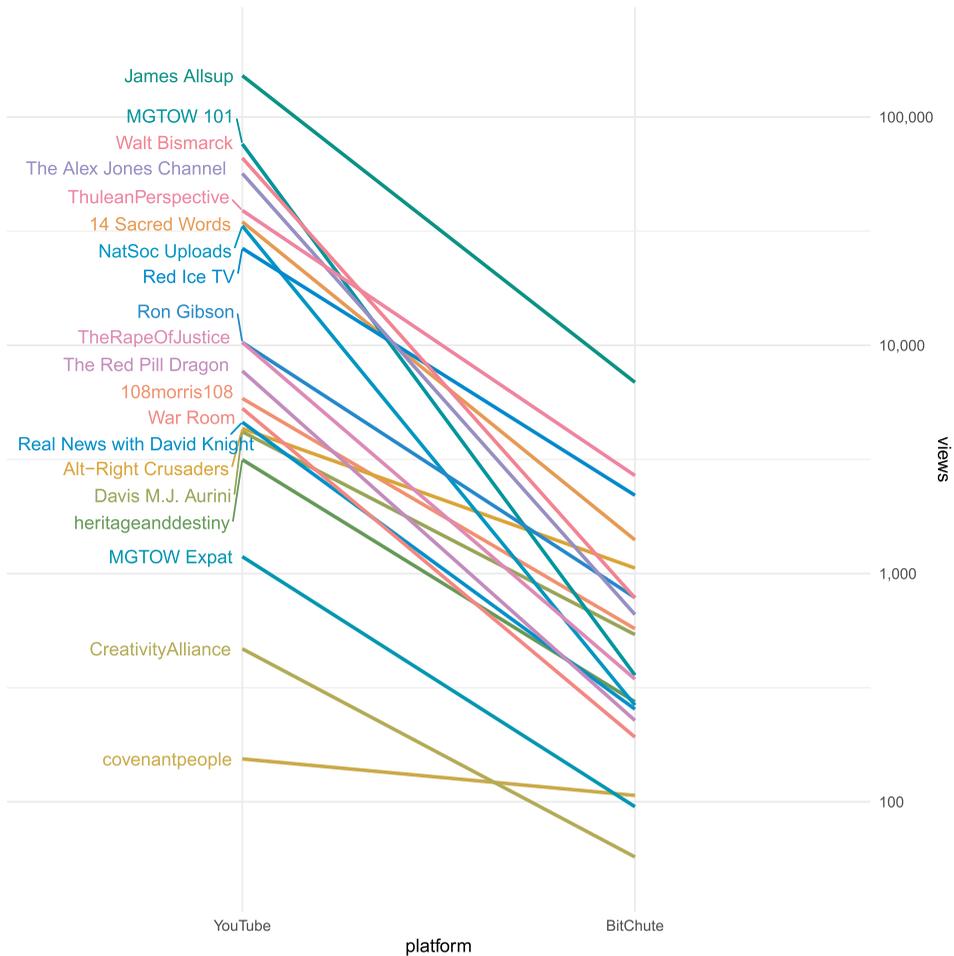
Figure 4. Estimated marginal means (predicted values) for the number of views. Difference between YouTube (left) and BitChute (right) for all 20 channels. Y-axis is shown on a common logarithm scale.

the channel Infowars (now BANNED.VIDEO) has attracted around 159,000 subscribers, uploaded around 20,00 videos, and accumulated over 58 million views. As we can see in Figure 5, the channel's deplatforming had an immediate but only short-lived effect on some individual videos that got uploaded to BitChute around the time of the deplatforming. More generally, while we can identify a slight upward trend, it is not comparable with Alex Jones' reach on YouTube, where he had over 2.4 million subscribers. In addition, Jones' Infowars was not only banned from YouTube but also from other platforms like Facebook or Spotify. And while one of the first videos on BitChute after the deplatforming was titled 'Alex Jones' Official Response To Corporate Censorship', others were named 'Obama Deep State Behind Big Tech's Purge Of Infowars', 'Banning Of Alex Jones Echoes Of Nazi Germany', or 'Globalists Reveal Themselves As The Enemies Of Free Speech'. In a video called 'Unanswered Questions About Why Info Wars Was Banned'[5] Alex Jones argues that the deplatforming made Infowars 'legendary' as 'everybody is starting to rally to our cause.' As we can see in Figure 5, this was hardly the case, as
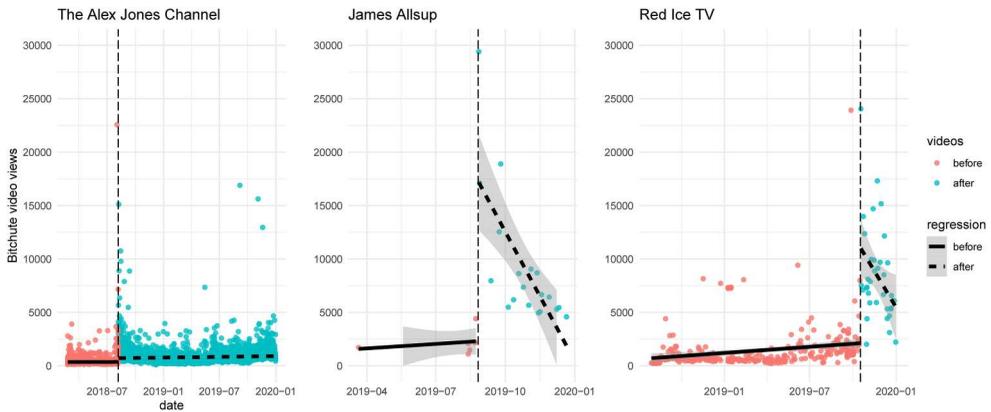
Figure 5. The view numbers (y-axis) for all videos on the three BitChute channels of Alex Jones, James Alssup, and Red Ice TV are plotted over time (y-axis). Dashed lines indicate time of YouTube deplatforming. Separate linear regressions are estimated (95%-Cis are shown) left and right of the cutoff point (time of deplatforming).

Jones' views on BitChute remained a shadow of his YouTube days. With that having said, BitChute was not Alex Jones' only backup channel. Most prominently, Jones runs his own website that hosts all videos and livestreams, as well as an online shop. Given his claims that his deplatforming would backfire, one would assume that the traffic to his website rose after the deplatforming. Yet, a New York Times analysis of SimilarWeb data suggests that his website's traffic was almost half what it was prior to the deplatforming (Nicas, 2018).

James Allsup: When YouTube deplatformed the white nationalist political commentator James Allsup in August 2019, he lost his channel with 450,000 subscribers. Allsup also expected his deplatforming, as he discusses one day after his channel was terminated by YouTube in a video on BitChute ('I PREDICTED BEING BANNED, AND I WAS RIGHT')[6] on 27. August 2019. He discusses deplatforming in general and insists that he is not a white supremacist. However, this claim contradicts his past actions, such as his participation at the Unite the Right rally and his close connection to other far-right actors in the US, including Richard Spencer. The Anti-Defamation League and corporations are responsible for what he calls 'censorship'. He complains in his BitChute video how YouTube first demonetized his videos and stopped recommending his videos before his channel was terminated. As the video was first streamed on Streamlab, he called his viewers to save and archive the video, and he promised to republish it also on BitChute, 'so it is preserved ad infinitum.' In general, he tries to present himself as a victim. James Allsup's last upload on BitChute was in June 2021.

Red Ice TV: The Swedish white nationalist YouTube channel Red Ice TV was removed in October 2019. At that time, the channel had over 330,000 subscribers. Initially, the channel owners tried to circumvent YouTube's ban by using a different channel (Red Ice Media), but this channel, too, was removed only a couple of days later. And while Red Ice TV has had a BitChute channel for a while (see Figure 5), its deplatforming from YouTube resulted in a direct increase in viewers on BitChute. In over three years, over 38,000 people subscribed to Red Ice TV's BitChute channel, which counts

Table 2. Regression discontinuity design for the three most popular channels. Unstandardized coefficients show 95% credible intervals in brackets. The unit of analysis is videos on BitChute. The dependent variable is the number of views. X before shows the estimate before the deplatforming, x after the estimate after the deplatforming (see also Figure 5). The deplatforming effect shows the change in views due to the deplatforming.

	Alex Jones	James Allsup	Red Ice TV
intercept	324 (276–374)	2190 (−1329–5696)	2092 (1612–2568)
deplatforming effect	404 (344–464)	15051 (9805–20313)	8957 (7446–10505)
x before	−0.30 (−0.82–0.22)	3.67 (−54.83–62.14)	3.16 (1.27–5.06)
x after	0.64 (0.10–1.17)	−135. 85 (−216.86 − − 55.10)	−77.16 (−112.5 − − 41.64)
n before/after	2639/5618	14/12	289/35
Bayes R^2	0.10	0.62	0.49

over 400 videos that generated more than 1.8 million views (by 2023, Red Ice TV accumulated around 50,000 subscribers and has uploaded over 900 videos). From the over 900 videos that were uploaded, 289 were uploaded prior to Red Ice TV's deplatforming from YouTube. Red Ice TV's rather active presence on BitChute even before they got removed from YouTube, as well as their short-lived backup YouTube channel, suggests that the channel owners anticipated an eventual deplatforming and, in the case of their BitChute channel, were trying to cultivate a new fanbase. Indeed, when the channel finally got removed from YouTube, the hosts said in the video 'YOUTUBE DELETED US'[7] that they had known that this was coming.

To test our second hypothesis, we used a regression discontinuity design for all three channels on BitChute that uses as a cutpoint the time of the YouTube deplatforming. This method allows us to assess whether the deplatforming on YouTube had an impact on the number of views on BitChute. For all three channels, the deplatforming has a substantial positive effect on the views on BitChute (see deplatforming effect in Table 2). However, how the views specifically develop after the deplatforming is different. While the video views of James Allsup and Red Ice TV both have a downward trend, Alex Jones' video views show a slight increase on BitChute over time after the deplatforming (see Table 2 and Figure 5).

Discussion

Overall, our analysis shows that the success of far-right content creators is strongly connected to YouTube as a platform. Based on our analysis of over 11,000 channels and, in a second step, comparing 20 deplatformed far-right actors on YouTube and BitChute, we find evidence for three overarching findings. First, network communities are correlated to their removal reasons. We see, for example, that political channels are most likely to get removed due to extreme speech, while music cover channels are, for example, most likely to get removed for impersonations. This highlights that YouTube's reasons for removal are not arbitrary but follow intuitive logic. Second, we find support for our first hypothesis: deplatformed far-right channels cannot reach the same engagement numbers and inherently influence on BitChute as they had on YouTube. We find that YouTube predicts more views and interactions than BitChute for all analyzed channels. Third, we find support for our second hypothesis as our analysis of the three largest deplatformed channels shows that they still can at least increase their view numbers

within BitChute after being deplatformed by YouTube. Still, only Alex Jones could keep this short-term increase on BitChute over time, and even then, the number of views cannot compare with the number of views on YouTube.

While there is no clear explanation for Alex Jones' slow but steady growth on Bitchute, we would like to propose three different aspects that might have contributed to it: 1) Prominence. It is likely that Alex Jones is more prominent than James Allsup or Red Ice TV due to his long-standing activities in the conspiracy theory and political right-wing community, and thus, more users are willing to search him out as they cannot get his content on YouTube anymore. As he also had significantly more subscribers on YouTube, it is possible that more users made the jump from YouTube and BitChute. 2) Agenda-setting. Contributing factors to Alex Jones' relative 'success' on BitChute might have also been tied to media coverage. First, as we suggested above, his deplatforming was covered in the mass media but was also discussed on social media. While the deplatformings of James Allsup and Red Ice TV might have also received coverage by the right-wing media ecosystem, it is unlikely that it compared to Alex Jones' coverage. 3) Legal woes. Finally, Alex Jones was also involved in high-profile lawsuits around his continued false claim regarding the Sandy Hook shooting being a 'false flag operation,' which also got a lot of news coverage. All of these aspects might have contributed to users searching his content out and the difference between Alex Jones and James Allsup and Red Ice TV. However, without an audience-side analysis, we cannot know for certain.

Deplatforming, in this sense, can be understood as a highly effective tool in minimizing extreme speech, as alternative platforms that allow this kind of content cannot mitigate the negative effect of being deplatformed on YouTube. Indeed, while Alex Jones had over 2.4 million subscribers on YouTube, Infowar's Bitchute presence in June 2021 was around 125,000 subscribers. Our analysis shows that the deplatformed far-right actors lose their 'amplification power' (Koebler, 2018). This highlights that YouTube's added value for content creators does not solely lie mainly in its technical infrastructure but rather in its 2 billion active monthly users. We, of course, agree with Jardine's (2019) conclusion that deplatforming actors do not automatically delete their malicious content in the form of ideas and memes. However, it does, as we can show with the case of far-right and conspiracy content in the US, limit their reach. While we observed a short-term increase in views on BitChute after the deplatforming of channels on YouTube, this effect for the three largest channels was only short-lived for two of them, and no channel was able to achieve, even during this period, the same viewing numbers as on YouTube. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that we cannot make any statements about the so-called 'Streisand effect' as observed by Innes and Innes (2021) on Facebook. The increase in views on BitChute can be best interpreted as a partial audience migration from YouTube.

Furthermore, we can see a clear pattern concerning the deplatforming reason for far-right channels between 2018 and late 2019, which is in line with YouTube's change in policy to counter extreme speech and disinformation. Political channels are more likely to be deleted mainly due to extreme speech. Our analysis helps to better understand how YouTube has changed from a platform 'empowering all by choosing none' (Gillespie, 2010, p. 357) to a platform defining speech and protecting commercial interests.

More generally, we thus find that mainstream social media platforms serve an essential function for the US far right and that the channel creators that only rely on alternative

platforms are restricted to smaller communities and thus inherently have less reach and wield less influence. Coming from a networked public sphere perspective (Benkler, 2006), deplatforming, coupled with the sheer size of social media platforms, equals condemning content creators to the fringe. This is, of course, not surprising. Many far-right channels feature anti-Semitic, racist, and/or misogynist content. They, thus, are inherently at odds with the platform's terms of service and traditional definitions of deliberation. This, however, does not change the fact that deplatforming effectively opens up a chance for potential further radicalization. It is questionable whether content creators who deliberately toe the line of a platform's community guidelines to test what is still within the realm of accepted speech and appeal to viewers based on these scandals should stay on the platform to begin with.

While the complaint that mainstream platforms censor content and thus violate the deplatformed channel owner's freedom of expression might hold some merit, our overarching finding instead suggests that the content that is facing deplatforming is also the most extreme and at odds both with YouTube's community guidelines as well as what we would consider from a public sphere perspective 'legitimate' speech. However, our findings do not weaken the general problem of deplatforming and censorship. These are genuine issues, and it can be considered troublesome just how well deplatforming works in pushing unwanted voices to the fringe. It raises the question of whether private platforms should have this power over the networked public sphere or not.

We, unfortunately, do not have a good answer to this question. This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of deplatforming and its effect on the deplatformed and, more broadly, on the role of mainstream and alternative platforms for the US far right. More research in this field is needed to understand how other political communities are affected and how alternative platforms can buffer the deplatforming, and, finally, whether deplatforming contributes to a more extreme discourse.

Our study also has limitations. For instance, we have mainly focused on the US far right on YouTube. Future studies should also look at other deplatformed political channels besides the far right and expand their scope outside the US. In addition, we cannot comment on the validity of YouTube's reasons for every channel. Qualitative research could highlight this matter and help explain whether YouTube's reasons are legitimate or exaggerated. Finally, our analysis was limited to channels we had in our list from 2017/2018. We thus lack channels that might have been added since then, for example, in the context of QAnon.

Notes

1. https://support.bitchute.com/policy/guidelines#prohibited-content (accessed on June 13, 2021)
2. https://www.bitchute.com/video/koRP1rj8pkk/ (accessed on July 21, 2023)
3. For all of our models we used 4 chains with 4,000 iterations in total and 500 warm-up iterations. All estimates reached an R-hat of 1. All models converged and the trace plots show well mixing and stationary chains for all estimates.
4. The deletion rate (29%) of our additional 202 far-right channels is higher than the deletion rate (17%) of the 314 channels from our first data set due to the more extreme orientation of these channels (e.g., KKK).
5. https://www.bitchute.com/video/gUkqCehne1tb/ (accessed on October 15, 2020)
6. https://www.bitchute.com/video/Vl8r9niOzKFD/ (accessed on October 15, 2020)
7. https://www.bitchute.com/video/9weYyyk3aQ0D (accessed on October 11, 2020).

Disclosure statement

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