

The alternative social media site ecosystem

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Extended Abstract

A number of small “free speech” social media sites have emerged in recent years, offering an alternative to Twitter or Facebook that is centered around looser moderation policies and practices than those of more established sites. This positions the sites as a refuge from “censorship,” a condition that has shaped a behavior in which controversial language and low-quality sources of information are more likely to appear. Internally, this environment has helped cultivate a user base that centralizes the information they get on these sites in their news consumption habits. Externally, this environment has potential broad effects on society, despite their small size. For instance, Parler was allegedly used to plan the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, while Gab was linked to an attack on a synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018. The links of some of these sites to prominent figures also raises their potential for influence: Truth Social was founded by former President Trump and Rumble has signed a number of agreements with figures ranging from Donald Trump Jr. to Russell Brand. Yet despite this growing influence in everyday political discourse, these sites have received limited scholarly scrutiny. Moreover, they have rarely been studied as a group, in no small part due to the difficulty involved in gathering data from a disparate set of new sites that don’t have managed access to their data – as is the case of Twitter’s API.

In this study, we use a multi-method approach to examine these sites by looking at their affordances, user attitudes and experiences. We also examine the behavior of prominent users on seven characteristic examples – Bitchute, Gab, Gettr, Parler, Rumble, Telegram, and Truth Social. The approach combines a representative survey of U.S. adults who get news from these sites, an audit of their practices and policies and a detailed analysis of a sample of 1,400 prominent accounts (those with the highest number of followers) and 600,000 posts from these accounts from the month of June 2022. Combining these approaches allows us to shed light on how the unique moderation policies in this alternative social media ecosystem foster the proliferation of certain types of content– and observe the downstream effect of such policies to the levels of user satisfaction towards the sites.

Our study finds that all seven sites extoll their commitment to “free speech” – but that nearly all of them moderate content to some extent. Still, their users are drawn to these sites for their free speech commitment – 22% of people who get news on these sites say that lack of censorship is the first thing that comes to mind about them. And their experience is largely positive: roughly two-thirds of these users say they have found a community on these sites, majorities of each site’s users say that discussions are friendly, and majorities on four of the seven sites say they are satisfied with their experiences. These sites are also key sources of political news for their users. In fact, vast majorities say they see news there that they wouldn’t see elsewhere extremely or fairly often (52%) or sometimes (32%). And this news is more likely to be about government and politics than anything else: 52% of news users say this is the most common news they see on these sites. Moreover, majorities on most sites studied say that they expect the news they see on

the specific sites they use to be mostly accurate (roughly seven-in-ten or higher, depending on the site).

We also determined the types of content these users are most likely to see by examining all posts from June 2022 from the most prominent accounts on each site. During this period, majorities of these prominent accounts on each site posted about some of the hot button issues that appeared during data collection– vaccines; abortion; LGBTQ issues; gun control and shootings; and the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. These accounts – which were mostly individuals who commonly described themselves as right leaning, religious, or patriotic – often wrote about these issues using offensive or controversial terms. For instance, most common phrases featured on the posts mentioning LGBTQ topic include inflammatory towards members of the community, while phrases on vaccine prominently featured the names of several influential vaccine deniers such as Naomi Wolf and Stew Peters.

Prominent accounts in our study are much less likely to share information from “mainstream” news media sources such as print publication, television, and wire services, in favor of sharing resources from newer or less-established digital-only outlets – as well as other social media platforms. In fact, one of the most common destinations for links found in these posts is The Gateway Pundit, a digital outlet that has been criticized for [publishing false information](#). Moreover, a noteworthy percentage of prominent accounts on these seven sites have been banned on other social media sites – with that number rising to one-third on BitChute.

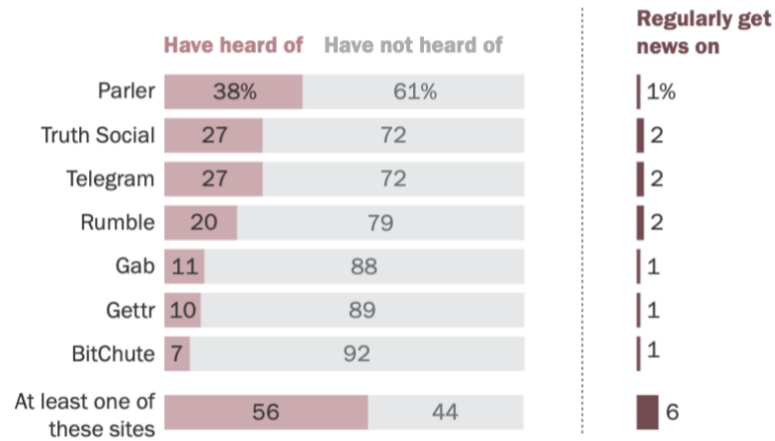
Taken together, these findings suggest that these new alternative social media sites have fostered an environment of low-quality information characterized by offensive and controversial language – and the small number of Americans who use these sites like this experience. Still, this is a new space in the social media environment, and these behaviors and norms are likely to change. This research is a first look at this environment that sets the stage for future research, including the role of echo chambers and other political segmentation on beliefs; comparisons to more established social media sites; and more in-depth analysis of the role that the norms on each site affect the user experience and their subsequent attitudes.

In addition to the substantive findings, our study reports on the practical challenges of a computational study of social media sites that don’t offer an API – and that, in some cases, are actively trying to counter research. Scraping seven different websites requires investigating and understanding the data protocols employed by each site, and, in some cases working around the various anti-bot measures they use – both of which can change as new features are added or, as was the case during our collection period, the site adds new encryption methods on their data. We also discuss the methodological difficulties of studying sites of very disparate nature: BitChute and Rumble focus on video sharing, Telegram started as a messaging app, and the others are microblogging sites. Only one of the sites studied here offer official API access (Telegram) and each of them structures their data in distinct ways, requiring bespoke toolkits for data collection. In our study, we outline our approach to collecting, harmonizing, and analyzing the data focusing on lessons for other researchers interested in comparative media research.

Figures

The extent to which Americans have heard of alternative social media sites varies; a very small share of the public gets news on them

% of U.S. adults who ____ each alternative social media site

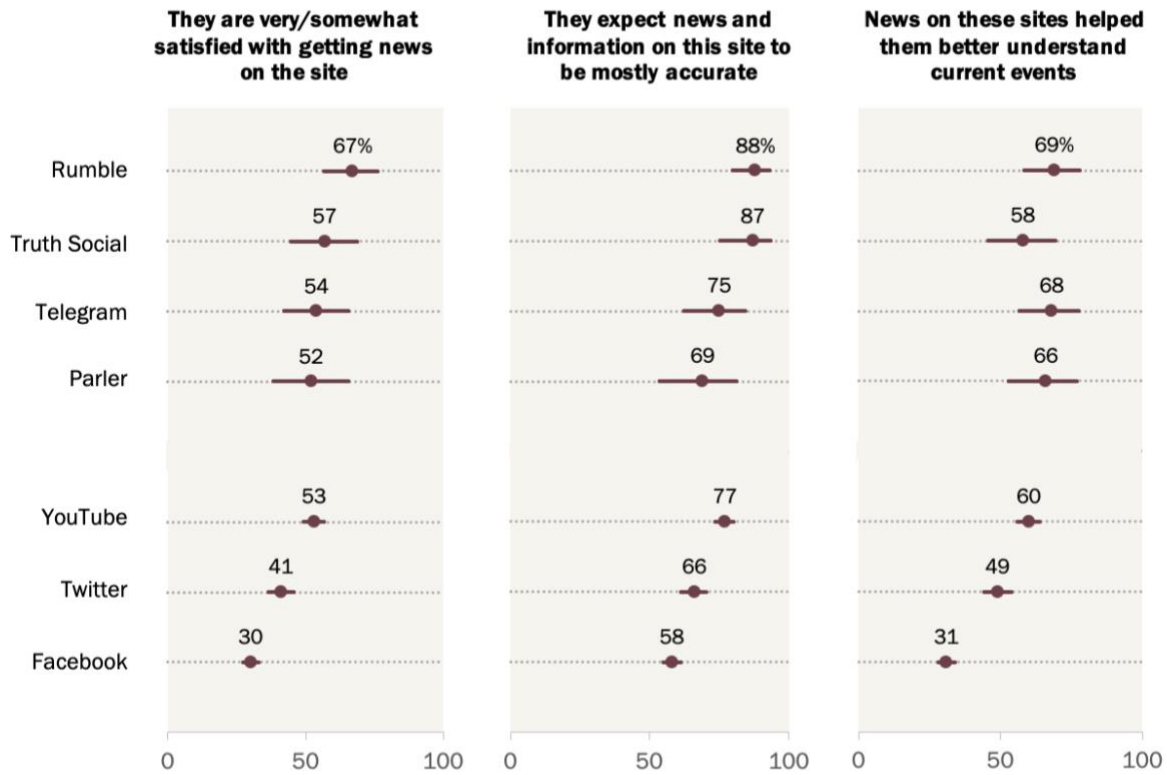


Note: Respondents who did not answer not shown.

Figure 1. Share of U.S. adults who have heard of and regularly get news from alternative social media sites

Alternative social media news consumers report having generally positive news experiences on these sites

Among those who regularly get news on each site, % who say ...

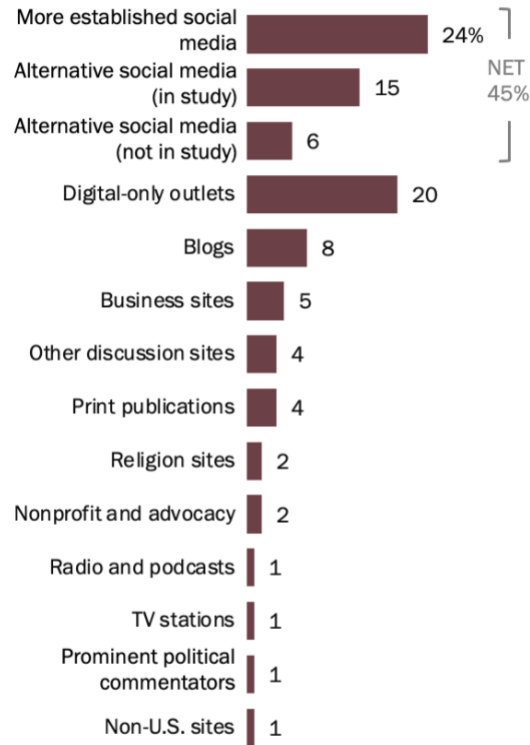


Note: BitChute, Gab and Gettr not shown due to insufficient sample size. Lines surrounding data points represent the margin of error of each estimate.

Figure 2. Share of alternative social media news consumer on their experience on the sites

Nearly half of links from prominent alternative social media accounts pointed to other social media sites

% of links from prominent alternative social media accounts in June 2022 that went to ...



Note: N=302,828 links from posts by prominent accounts that posted in June 2022. Analysis includes only domains with at least 100 shares during the month. An equal number of accounts were sampled from the accounts with the most followers from each of seven alternative social media sites: BitChute, Gab, Gettr, Parler, Rumble, Telegram and Truth Social. Categories featured in less than 1% of links (satire/humor, news aggregators, wire services, health care entities, U.S. political entities, public health agencies) and those that did not fall into any of the listed categories are not shown. See methodology for more details.

Figure 3. Share of links by prominent accounts on alternative social media sites that went to multiple source types