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1. Introduction

In this paper I will explore the effects of social media and stochastic terrorism in both Myanmar and the United States. I will discuss various examples of violence related to domestic extremism. First, the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, and how Facebook allowed extremist and hateful content to become so prevalent across the platform, being bolstered by political and religious leaders and brought to action by various radicalized civilians. Next, I will discuss a mass shooting and the attempted coup-d'etat on January 6th, 2021, and how various online social media forums helped to incite that violence. Finally, I will consider if and how tech companies should be held accountable for domestic radicalization.

2. Domestic Terrorism and Social Media in Myanmar

In Myanmar, almost 90% of the population is Buddhist. Christianity, Islam, and other folk religions make up the remaining 10%. Myanmar was colonized by the British in 1885, and the colonists pitted the Buddhist majority and the religious minorities—specifically the Muslim Rohingya—against each other. When Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the country was left with a hateful legacy, with the Buddhist majority implementing restrictions on movement, and perpetrating acts of violence against the Rohingya (“Atrocities against Burma’s Rohingya Population”).

In the early 2000s, Myanmar went through a reformation of its government, with the military rule relinquishing some of its power to create a more civilian government. This led to many restrictive laws concerning internet access and censorship to be repealed. By 2016, almost 80% of the country had a SIM card. Facebook became one of the most popular platforms for online communication in the country, and became many people's main source of information. This rapid shift towards the internet increased optimism worldwide concerning the continuing acts of violence towards the Rohingya.

2.1. Rohingya Genocide and Facebook

Domestic extremism and terrorism exploded in 2017, after a Rohingya militia attacked various military bases on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. The Burmese army responded in an incredibly violent manner, launching “clearance operations,” later recognized as ethnic cleansing (Griffiths and Wilkinson). It was not just the army participating in these acts of violence. Anti-Islam riots broke out across the country, and Buddhist nationalist “vigilante groups” assisted the Burmese military in the ethnic cleansing (Zaleznik). That optimism felt in 2016 couldn't be further from the truth. State-condoned violence continued, and picked up momentum while increasingly extremist content was being consumed on Facebook. Facebook wasn't actively trying to incite a genocide, however, the company's neglect allowed hateful posts and misinformation surrounding the Rohingya population to be spread around the online groups and chats and algorithms in Myanmar.

2.2. What we learn from Myanmar

What happened in Myanmar is an example of stochastic terrorism. Stochastic terrorism is the use of mass communication by a public figure to “[publicly demonize] a person or group resulting in the incitement of a violent act” (“What Is ‘Stochastic

Terrorism,’ And Why Is It Trending?”). Violence doesn’t come from the stochastic terrorists themselves, but from people radicalized and exposed to their ideas. Stochastic terrorism gives the illusion of incredibly radicalized people acting on their own, like a “lone wolf,” (Angove) while ignoring the many forms of radicalization that individuals experience. In Myanmar, people experienced radicalization through political and religious leaders (Rhude), and through the online echo chamber Facebook provided. We can see how religious and racial nationalism can affect the content people see, and if left unchecked, the combination can have deadly consequences.

3. Domestic Terrorism and Social Media in the United States

Social media assists acts of Domestic Terrorism by radicalizing individuals in two main ways. The first way is an echo chamber. This happens in online forums with a user-directed algorithm, like Reddit and 8chan, but can also occur in automated algorithmic social media, like Instagram or TikTok. An echo chamber will confirm biases an individual has, and can limit knowledge of the news and the world around us. It can also augment potentially harmful ideas individuals have and blast them back on a much larger scale, which can lead to dangerous radicalization (Cabianca et al.).

The second way is an amplifier. Public figures can say something and their words can be shared, reposted, and “liked”. This can lead to posts “going viral” because of a high number of likes, and these posts will be favoured by the algorithm, and shown to more people not in the regular audience of the public figure. Social media can also spread posts faster within the target audience. If a religious or political leader says something online that falls under the category of stochastic terrorism, their audience will see that and react to whatever the public figure said, with political mobilization, political contention, and even violence (Awasthi).

3.1. Social Media as an Echo Chamber: 2019 El Paso Walmart Shooting

On August 3rd, 2019, there was a shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. Twenty-three people were killed and twenty-two were injured. The Federal Bureau of Investigation concluded that it was a hate crime and an act of domestic terrorism. Directly before the attack, the shooter uploaded his manifesto—which contained a lot of anti-immigration and white nationalist rhetoric—to 8chan, a social media site. As part of his motivation, the shooter confessed that he wanted to kill Mexicans (Moore and Berman). In this case, 8chan acted as an echo chamber for harmful ideas. 8chan isn't algorithmic, but instead is a community moderated social media site that functions mostly with message boards where people can join a forum of like-minded people. This can lead to dangerous rabbit holes for people who have pre-established racially or religiously nationalistic views, or for people trying to figure out their political identity. The message boards tend to be quite politically extreme, mainly serving as a home for far right white supremacists, because of the user-moderated design of the website. 8chan is so deeply committed to free speech that hateful and violent speech was able to grow (Wong). A lack of moderation was part of what led to this shooting in El Paso, just like the lack of moderation in Myanmar which furthered violence against the Rohingya Muslim population. The shooting is not on the same scale as the Rohingya genocide, but it started from the same feelings of racial and religious superiority.

3.2. Social Media as an Amplifier: January 6th Attack on the Capitol

On January 6th, 2021, a mob of Trump supporters attempted a coup during the session of Congress certifying the election results (“The January 6 Attack on the U.S. Capitol”). At an earlier rally, Donald Trump had told a crowd to “fight like hell” to “save their country” (Klein). This is another example of stochastic terrorism. A political leader

said something indirectly about a group of people to demonize them—in this situation it was lawmakers confirming Joe Biden as President—and planted the seeds of fear in the minds of individuals, implying that they needed to fight tooth and nail because their country was in danger. President Trump and sympathizers also turned to social media—specifically Twitter, now X—to amplify and spread their cause. The use of Twitter resulted in a “call to action” which led to a mob at the Capitol. In this example of violence due to radicalization, social media acted as an amplifier. Algorithms promoted posts that were receiving a lot of attention, either views or likes, which led to politically charged mobilization. Social media isn’t only a place where calls to action or warnings are amplified, it can also be a place where political views are formed. Social media algorithms tend to promote right-leaning content, and can act as an amplifier for those views (González-Bailón et al.). This in turn creates a pseudo echo chamber, where algorithms become increasingly conservative, and start to lean more and more right-wing. Increased political polarization is another driving force in domestic radicalization and extremist violence, which is amplified and echoed through social media.

4. How do we fix this?

There are two solutions to this growing issue that I can see. We can hold companies accountable, or we can hold individuals who use online forums to spread hateful rhetoric accountable. I think we will have to use both solutions to adequately fix the issue.

4.1. Holding Companies Accountable

In Myanmar, one of the biggest reasons why the mass violence against the Rohingya population was able to be carried out is because of the lack of moderation in

the content seen on people's feeds, or in private messages. With the El Paso shooting, there was a similar issue on 8chan, because no content on there was moderated or reviewed. I think the way that we start solving this problem is by moderating more content on social media. The premise of 8chan was free speech, however, most of the speech there is intended to incite violence, threaten groups or individuals, and could be classified as "fighting words." None of these forms of speech are protected by the 1st amendment. The solution becomes more complex when stochastic terrorism is considered, because most of the time, the rhetoric coming from the public figure isn't directly intended to incite violence. This is where the second part of the solution comes into play, individualized.

4.2 Individual Solutions

Most instances of political violence seem to come from "lone wolf" attackers, but many of these people are radicalized in the same echo chamber. I think the best way to combat radicalization through social media is through internet literacy. Because most speech is protected, and because people can use dogwhistles and different phrasing to avoid content moderation or claims of fighting words (Saul), moderation will only solve the tip of the iceberg of extremist content. There is no way to limit the dangerous ideas, but there is a way to teach people how to recognize them. Media and information literacy—as well as critical thinking skills—can prevent violent extremism by helping individuals to recognize patterns of propaganda and hate speech (Al-Nasser).

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