

Case Study 2: YouTube*

At one point during the 2016 presidential election campaign, Zeynep Tufekci (New York Times Journalist) noticed that after watching some videos of Donald Trump rallies on YouTube, the video streaming platform started recommending him and “autoplaying” videos for that featured white supremacist rants, Holocaust denials and other disturbing content. This was very peculiar since she was not in the habit of watching content related to extreme right-wing.

Zeynep was curious whether this was an exclusively right-wing phenomenon. And she created another YouTube account and started watching videos of Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders and following watching whatever YouTube recommended next. Before long, she was directed to videos of a leftish conspiratorial cast, including arguments about the existence of secret government agencies and allegations that the United States government was behind the attacks of Sept. 11. As with the Trump videos, YouTube was recommending content that was more and more extreme than the mainstream content she had started with.

Intrigued, she repeated the experiment with nonpolitical content. And noticed the same basic pattern emerging again. For instance, videos about vegetarianism led her to videos about veganism. Videos about jogging led her to videos about running ultramarathons and so on.

“What keeps people glued to YouTube? Its algorithm seems to have concluded that people are drawn to content that is more extreme than what they started with — or to incendiary content in general. [...] What we are witnessing is the computational exploitation of a natural human desire: to look “behind the curtain,” to dig deeper into something that engages us. As we click and click, we are carried along by the exciting sensation of uncovering more secrets and deeper truths. YouTube leads viewers down a rabbit hole of extremism, while Google racks up the ad sales.”

* This Case Study was inspired by an article from the New York Times published in March 2018
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html>