

# Assignment #1

---

**Title:**  
*Conference Paper*

**Name:** Taj Powell  
**Student Number:** 17756073  
**Unit Name:** Social Media, Communities and Networks  
**Email Address:** [Taj.powell@outlook.com](mailto:Taj.powell@outlook.com)  
**Date Submitted:** 04/04/21  
**Word Count:** 1811  
**URL (if applicable):**

I declare that I have retained a copy of this assignment. I have read and understood Curtin University policies on Plagiarism and Copyright and declare that this assignment complies with these policies. I declare that this assignment is my own work and has not been submitted previously in any form for assessment.

\_\_\_\_\_Taj Powell\_\_\_\_\_

(Date/Signature)

(Typing your name in the space provided is sufficient when submitting online via FLECS-Blackboard.)

**“Social networking sites like Facebook and Reddit have amplified the voice of alt-right extremists and allowed for faster spread of misinformation.”**

Social networking sites have changed the way we view and access information on the internet. It is now easier than ever to communicate, share opinions and forge relationships with like-minded people all across the world. The internet is now the most powerful tool used by organisations of all forms to share their message and expand their horizons. Unfortunately, this has meant that there has been a surge of hate speech broadcast across social networking platforms. It is now easier than ever for extremist groups to spread hate speech and recruit new members through the use of propaganda posted online. Arguably the biggest change that has come about in recent years has been the rise of the ‘Alt-Right’. Two key platforms that have made this change possible are Facebook and Reddit. Both of these sites have different elements, and specific content policies that make them effective platforms for users to spread and consume extremist content. Within this essay, analysis will be made on the key features and policies of Facebook and Reddit that have allowed them to amplify the voice of the Alt-Right and allow for rapid spread of misinformation online.

To better understand how the Alt-Right use social networking sites to promote their message, it is essential to understand how the Alt-Right came to exist in the first place. Essentially, the movement was born after the election of Barack Obama as US President in 2008 – at the time, a number of conservative representatives were unhappy about the election result, and blamed the election of the USA’s first black President on the failure of so-called “mainstream conservatives” to prevent it. These conservatives represented groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, Nazis and Neo-Confederates, all of which are regarded as ‘extremist’ in their political stance. They essentially suggested that if the current conservative (right-wing) politicians were unable to prevent the left from dominating politics, then there was a need for an ‘alternative right’, with a stronger conservative message (Sangillo, 2019). It was not until 2012, after a few key events, that the Alt-Right movement really started to gain traction online. One key event was the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. This event is widely credited to be the beginning of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ (BLM) movement, which saw thousands rally for change after Zimmerman was acquitted. It was the counter argument to the BLM message that saw huge support from conservative, right-wing sides of politics. This in turn gave exposure to Alt-Right leaders and ultra-conservative activists who made comments and shared their opinions online. Between 2012 and 2015, there was an annual increase in the number of Alt-Right posts across Facebook, Twitter and Reddit. In 2016, however, there was an explosion of Alt-Right, ultra-conservative content

being posted on social networking sites, as a result of the election of Donald Trump (Shahin & Ng, 2020). This explosion of content is largely what led to the Alt-Right being defined the way it is today.

In today's context, the Alt-Right manifests itself primarily online, which makes estimating their strength difficult (Cook, 2016). Alt-Right leaders use social networking platforms to organise rallies in private groups, which means that they are often hard to keep track of. However, as the movement became more and more prevalent online, particularly in the US, it became abundantly clear that social networking sites were the foundation on which the entire movement was built upon – particularly after the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US President. There is no doubt that Trump became an icon of intolerance, and almost normalised white nationalism. Numerous Alt-Right forums across Facebook and Reddit are centred around Trump and use his style of politics and justification for their own brash, often offensive content (Sangillo, 2019). Basically, he became a figurehead for a movement that had previously lacked a real leader. Shortly after his election, and the coinciding increase of conservative content being posted on social networking sites, Facebook began to record that *millions* of young people were either leaving Facebook altogether, or simply deleting the app from their phones. To begin with, Facebook theorised that this was due to other platforms becoming more prevalent with young people, and Facebook was falling behind with the younger audience, but after a short while it became clear that young people were leaving Facebook because it was becoming far too right-wing, whereas other platforms such as Instagram and Twitter were more left-wing (Bilton, 2020). Hard evidence of this became clear in November 2020, when Twitter, and Snapchat banned Donald Trump from using their platform altogether, as they believed his posts incited violence and division. At the same time, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, publicly refused to censor or fact-check any of Trump's posts, claiming that he did not feel comfortable doing so because he is "not the arbiter of free speech" (Cook, 2016). Further to this, posts from Alt-Right activists and other ultra-conservative groups such as Ben Shapiro, ForAmerica and Dan Bongino regularly feature in the daily top 10 most-shared Facebook posts in the USA (Facebook's Top 10, 2021). This is a clear indication of the dominant political persuasion present on Facebook. What this essentially means, is that Facebook have a vested interest in pleasing conservative groups, as they are the groups giving Facebook the most financial support (Timberg, 2021). This makes especially clear that Facebook, as an organisation, makes far more allowances for the Alt-Right to post and consume content, which therefore amplifies the voice of Alt-Right extremism and allows for faster spread of misinformation.

Facebook have long struggled with drawing a line in the sand between what is and isn't acceptable on their platform – to do so, according to them, would violate users' right to free speech (Sangillo, 2019). Facebook and its policies have been questioned numerous times – sex workers are regularly banned for posting 'offensive' content, yet self-proclaimed Nazis are allowed to continue spreading hate (Are, 2021). Many believe this is a fundamental failure of Facebook's censorship policies – how can a user be allowed to post regular antisemitic images and content, with the sole purpose of causing offence, but another be banned for posting a topless image of themselves? There has been plenty of debate regarding why this is the case, and the simple answer could be that nudity is far easier to define than hate speech. One prime example of where Facebook has failed to draw the line is in its policy toward holocaust denial. For anyone to deny that the holocaust happened, is clearly spreading misinformation, which is harmful and offensive, and should therefore be censored by Facebook – however this is not the case. Facebook refuses to censor posts on this topic, as they generally do not include any specific insults or slurs that can be deemed as offensive, rather they simply suggest that what is written in history, and the first-hand accounts of events that took place during the holocaust, are inaccurate (University Wire, 2020). Further to this, Facebook made a decision to include far-right news publications in its 'Facebook Watch' section – a section of Facebook dedicated to what they describe as "high quality journalism". These sources include sites known for blatantly including false information and offensive language within their reports and articles, such as Breitbart, Red Ice TV and VDare (Wong, 2019). Facebook spokespeople are directly quoted as saying that in order to create a reliable, unbiased news source, Facebook should include "content from ideological publishers on the left and right" (Wong, 2019). This is despite the fact that a large portion of these so-called 'news sources' continually and regularly post content containing factually incorrect statements for the pure purpose of causing offence. This shows that Facebook's hesitance to ban users and censor publishers that are openly extremist in their political views, amplifies the voice of alt-right extremists and allows for faster spread of misinformation.

Reddit also plays a significant role in allowing extremist ideology to spread. In general, Reddit takes a much more hands-off approach to moderation than other platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Snapchat (Zakrzewski, 2020). Part of the reason for this is the way the platform is structured, which is somewhat different to other social networking sites. It is much more difficult to find Reddit users who are posting extremist content and block their activity, than it is for Facebook or Twitter users (Lagorio-Chafkin, 2018). This is because Reddit is a platform where

users create anonymous profiles and use alias' to access content. Further to this, users accessing extremist content have created their own dialect of words and phrases designed to make it even more difficult for any algorithms or moderators to pick up their activity (Sonnad & Squirrell, 2017). The platform also uses what are called 'subreddits', which are basically focus groups for singular subjects. This means that anyone with a similar view can access content specifically about that topic and engage with like-minded users easily. There is no limit to how many of these groups can be created, and each of these subreddits is self-moderated, meaning that the Reddit community, essentially, are meant to police themselves. This, obviously, opens the door to a lot of questionable content. In 2015, Reddit was called out by the Southern Poverty Law Centre as being home to "the most violently racist" content on the internet, citing a "constellation of antiblack forums" (Tiffany, 2020) as the reason for making this assertion. This combined with a recent study that found that right-leaning forums contained three times as much hate speech containing racist, sexist, religious and homophobic attacks as the left-leaning groups (Zakrzewski, 2020) makes it clear that Reddit can be, and has been, used to spread extremist content. Although Reddit has taken steps to try and reduce the amount of Alt-Right content visible on their platform in recent months, their lack of effort to do this in the past is what has essentially allowed violent, racist content to fester and grow out of control for years. This is a clear indication of the way Reddit has amplified the voice of alt-right extremists and allowed for faster spread of misinformation.

In summary, there is no question that Facebook in particular hold a level of responsibility for the drastic increase in extremist content seen online, given that they have a tendency to refuse to draw a line in the sand and define a point, after which, content becomes classified as inappropriate or inaccurate. Reddit, on the other hand, also hold a significant level of responsibility for providing an *anonymous* platform for users to spread hate and incite violence. The very layout of their platform invites this kind of use, by providing the space for like-minded individuals to share ideas and opinions. As a result, it can clearly be argued that **social networking sites, in particular Facebook and Reddit, have amplified the voice of Alt-Right extremists, and allowed for faster spread of misinformation.**

## References:

- Are, C. (2021). *Facebook's free speech myth is dead – and regulators should take notice*. The Conversation. Retrieved April 3, 2021, from <http://theconversation.com/facebooks-free-speech-myth-is-dead-and-regulators-should-take-notice-153119>
- Bilton, N. (2020). *How Facebook Became the Social Media Home of the Right*. Vanity Fair. Retrieved April 3, 2021, from <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/06/how-facebook-became-the-social-media-home-of-the-right>
- Cook, J. (2016). *US election: Trump and the rise of the alt-right—BBC News*. Retrieved April 4, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37899026>
- Facebook's Top 10. (2021, March 30). The top-performing link posts by U.S. Facebook pages in the last 24 hours are from: 1. ForAmerica 2. Franklin Graham 3. Ben Shapiro 4. Dan Bongino 5. Dr. Sasa 6. Dan Bongino 7. Fox News 8. ForAmerica 9. Ben Shapiro 10. Sean Hannity [Tweet]. @FacebooksTop10. <https://twitter.com/FacebooksTop10/status/1376921674424053760>
- Free speech or hate speech: New Facebook policy serves as step in right direction. (2020, Oct 23). *University Wire* <https://link.library.curtin.edu.au/gw?url=https://www-proquest-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/wire-feeds/free-speech-hate-new-facebook-policy-serves-as/docview/2453828628/se-2?accountid=10382>
- Shahin, S., & Ng, Y. M. M. (2020, January 7). *White Twitter: Tracing the Evolution of the alt-right in Retweets, 2009-2016*. <https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2020.296>
- Sonnad, N. & Squirrell, T. (2017). The alt-right is creating its own dialect. Here's the dictionary. *Quartz*. Retrieved April 4, 2021 from <https://qz.com/1092037/the-alt-right-is-creating-its-own-dialect-heres-a-complete-guide/>
- Tiffany, K. (2020, June 12). *Reddit Is Finally Facing Its Legacy of Racism*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/06/reddit-racism-open-letter/612958/>
- Timberg, C. (2021). How conservatives learned to wield power inside Facebook. *Washington Post*. Retrieved April 4, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/02/20/facebook-republican-shift/>
- Zakrzewski, C. (2020). Analysis | The Technology 202: New study reveals extent of hate speech on Reddit in right-leaning forums. *Washington Post*. Retrieved April 4,

2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-technology-202/2020/06/15/the-technology-202-new-study-reveals-extent-of-hate-speech-on-reddit-in-right-leaning-forums/5ee6ab4c602ff12947e8c19a/>