Rethink needed to stop the spread of hateful material online

November 11 2020

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Digital platform Reddit's efforts to limit the spread of hateful and misogynistic content is driving users to self-moderated forums where the material can spread largely unchecked, according to new research from The Australian National University (ANU).

Ph.D. researcher Simon Copland analyzed the impact of Reddit's

"quarantine" on two men's rights subreddits—r/TheRedPill and r/Braincels.

The quarantine was revamped in 2018 and limits the ability of Reddit users to access particular channels—a similar initiative to recent bans of groups such as QAnon from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

"While the [quarantine](#) resulted in a drop in activity of around 50 percent on both channels, those users who stayed didn't become less misogynistic in their language," Mr Copland said.

"More worryingly, it resulted in a significant campaign from users to migrate to other, self-moderated forums. These forums are watched far less closely and in turn allow hateful material to develop and spread more quickly. Essentially, this move from Reddit simply made the issue someone else's problem."

Mr Copland says this could have larger implications when it comes to banning right wing and hateful material from major social media platforms.

"Increasingly, we're seeing large digital platforms become more active in the moderation of material and particular users on their sites," he said.

"Earlier this year for example Reddit banned the largest pro-Donald Trump channel, r/The_Donald. More recently Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have banned accounts and removed material associated with QAnon. These bans are increasingly resulting in users, particularly from the far-right, migrating off large platforms to self-moderated ones. This includes the far-right platforms of Gab and Voat, as well as self-moderated communities. Early research is already showing that QAnon followers banned from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are flooding to some of these platforms. Outside of the eyes of the broader community

these spaces can potentially host even more violent and extreme material. Bans also lead these users to further distrust mainstream institutions, potentially entrenching more extremist views."

The research has been published in the journal *Internet Policy Review*.

More information: Simon Copland. Reddit quarantined: can changing platform affordances reduce hateful material online?, *Internet Policy Review* (2020). DOI: 10.14763/2020.4.1516

Provided by Australian National University