

Browsing recommended books on Amazon can lead to extremist rabbit hole

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Amazon's book recommendation algorithms that help customers discover new titles may have a dark side.

A new report from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue says these algorithms steer people to [books](#) about [conspiracy theories](#) and extremism, sometimes introducing them to the work of conspiracy theorists who've been banned by other [online platforms](#).

People browsing a book about one conspiracy on Amazon are likely to get suggestions for more books on that topic as well as books about other conspiracy theories about everything from QAnon to COVID-19 vaccine, the report found.

Other features, such as auto-complete in the search bar and content suggestions for the author or similar authors can also lead users down an extremist rabbit hole, said Chloe Colliver, head of digital policy and strategy at ISD.

The pattern is similar to problems observed on other major online platforms like Google's YouTube, whose algorithms have been found to direct users to extreme content, sucking them into violent ideologies.

"Given that vaccinations and COVID-19 issues are currently top of mind for many, the potential for recommendation of false or extremist information about these topics is certainly concerning," Colliver told U.S. TODAY. "The type of false information that was found to be recommended by Amazon's algorithms has been shown across the globe to contribute to real-world harms."

Colliver says the scale of the threat is hard to gauge without more transparency from Amazon which dominates the bookselling business.

"However, these recommendation systems are a central cog of Amazon's business model, so their potential negative or dangerous effects need to be better understood both by the company itself and by independent researchers and authorities," she said. "Given how vital the

[recommendation](#) systems are to Amazon's sales functions, it is safe to assume that recommendations of dangerous extremist or conspiracy content could be extremely pervasive."

In a statement to U.S. TODAY, Amazon said: "We take concerns from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue seriously and are committed to providing a positive experience for our customers. Similar to other stores that sell books, we provide our customers with access to a variety of viewpoints and our shopping and discovery tools are not designed to generate results oriented to a specific point of view."

Social media and other [technology companies](#) have taken increasingly aggressive steps to purge recommendations for disinformation or extremist content that poses a public threat.

On book pages, Amazon recommends other books to users in several ways including "customers who bought this item also bought," "customers who viewed this item also viewed," and "what other items do customers view after viewing this item?" Paid ads sometimes appear as well to promote "products related to this item."

"For most users, these recommendations are at best a useful way of finding new content they are interested in, and at worst an irritation to be harmlessly ignored," the report said. "For conspiracy theorists, white nationalists and users perhaps only curiously dipping their toes in the murky waters of extremist or conspiratorial content, however, these recommendations could serve as a gateway into a broader universe of conspiracy theories and misinformation, or to increasingly radical far-right and white nationalist content."

For examples, people browsing a book claiming vaccines are unsafe are nudged towards other anti-vaccine titles and to COVID-19 [conspiracy](#) content including a book by Judy Mikovits, maker of the widely

debunked "Plandemic" video who alleged that Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, had manufactured the virus that causes COVID-19 and shipped it to China.

"A bookstore does not have to host content that it deems to be outside the interests of most of its customers. It is similarly within Amazon's power to set clear guidelines on what kind of content it is and isn't comfortable profiting from," Colliver said. "Even without removing this content altogether, Amazon would be able to reduce the accessibility of potentially dangerous content on its site."

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