

Google algorithms help mislead public and legitimize conspiracy theorists, study finds

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Google algorithms place innocuous subtitles on prominent conspiracy theorists, which mislead the public and amplify extremist views, according to Simon Fraser University (SFU) researchers.

Someone like Gavin McInnes, creator of the neo-fascist Proud Boys organization—a terrorist entity in Canada and a hate group in the United States—isn't best known simply as a "Canadian writer" but that's the first thing the search engine's autocomplete subtitle displays in the field when someone types in his name.

In a study published in *M/C Journal* this month, researchers with The Disinformation Project at the School of Communication at SFU looked at the subtitles Google automatically suggested for 37 known conspiracy theorists and found that "in all cases, Google's subtitle was never consistent with the actor's conspiratorial behavior."

That means that influential Sandy Hook school shooting denier and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones is listed as "American radio host" and Jerad Miller, a white nationalist responsible for a 2014 Las Vegas shooting, is listed as an "American performer" even though the majority of subsequent search results reveal him to be the perpetrator of a mass shooting.

Given the heavy reliance of Internet users on Google's [search engine](#), the subtitles "can pose a threat by normalizing individuals who spread [conspiracy theories](#), sow dissension and distrust in institutions and cause harm to [minority groups](#) and vulnerable individuals," says Nicole Stewart, a communication instructor of communication and Ph.D. student on The Disinformation Project. According to Google, the subtitles generate automatically by complex algorithms and the engine cannot accept or create custom subtitles.

The researchers found that the labels are either neutral or positive—primarily reflecting the person's preferred description or job—but never negative.

"Users' preferences and understanding of information can be

manipulated upon their trust in Google search results, thus allowing these labels to be widely accepted instead of providing a full picture of the harm their ideologies and belief cause," says Nathan Worku, a master's student on The Disinformation Project.

While the study focused on conspiracy theorists, the same phenomenon happens when searching widely recognized terrorists and mass murders, according to the authors.

This study highlights the urgent need for Google to review the subtitles attributed to conspiracy theorists, terrorists, and mass murderers, to better inform the public about the negative nature of these actors, rather than always labeling them in neutral or positive ways.

Led by assistant professor Ahmed Al-Rawi, The Disinformation Project is a federally-funded research project that examines fake [news](#) discourses on Canadian news media and [social media](#).

Al-Rawi, Stewart, Worku and post-doctoral fellow Carmen Celestini were all authors of this latest study.

More information: Ahmed Al-Rawi et al, How Google Autocomplete Algorithms about Conspiracy Theorists Mislead the Public, *M/C Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.5204/mcj.2852](https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2852)

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