Twitter Thread by Matthew Sheffield



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Conservatives love to complain that everyone is against them: professors, journalists, intelligence officers, social media companies, and so on.

I used to as well until I considered that maybe having problems with everyone else isn't their fault, it's yours.

I was reminded of that realization when I read this important NYT article about how Facebook keeps weakening news source quality controls because conservative content gets disproportionately effected by them. https://t.co/sgV5WCD4wh

Unfortunately, this great piece of reporting by @MikeIsaac, @sheeraf, & @kevinroose didn't mention the greatest challenge in AI news signal processing: Humans can barely separate conservative & far-right content. Which means computers can't either.

This techno-semiotic conundrum originates from the fact that in the US, because there is no moderate conservative tradition, the gravitational center of the right is far removed from the political center.

More plainly, this means that almost all the energy and organizing on the right exists on the far right.

This is not the case on the US left where there is a strong moderate tradition capable of organization and force projection. Ask Bernie Sanders if you disbelieve.

For the past 50 years, the best way to win a Republican primary was to say that you were further to the right than the incumbent.

This dynamic has primed GOP voters to support extremists since the former extremists get to become the mainstream. First Ted Cruz, then Alex Jones.

Because of this dynamic, it means that somewhat more established outlets such as Fox News or National Review must engage with material and ideas from the far right in order to retain relevance, market share, and dollars.

This is why Fox occasionally reinforces white nationalist fears that increasing numbers of Hispanics and Asians will doom the GOP. https://t.co/oNV9xRVezN Or why every conservative magazine periodically runs screeds criticizing evolution.

As another examle of this, I have reported how in 2008 future white nationalist Richard Spencer was actually pressured into running racist material on a website he edited that was, at the time, more libertarian oriented: https://t.co/ETunOYrZR0

There are many other examples of this co-mingling of conservative and far-right within the same media outlets. I talked about several instances in a recent Twitter thread: https://t.co/v7Hx3dZAJr

> One of the most little-known facts about the conservative media is that there's a lot of crossover w/ media outlets that cater to racists & extremists.
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> Ben Shapiro provided the best example of this when he bashed "Jews in Hollywood" on a white nationalist podcast pic.twitter.com/Dn9NV453VC
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> — Matthew Sheffield (@mattsheffield) November 16, 2020

For a more academic look at the right/far-right information ecosystem, I highly recommend this research paper from @JonasKaiser
and @nikkiboura. It focuses on Breitbart as a bridge for extremist content but the overall principle is shown as well: https://t.co/gkTbyplxse

The bottom line is that because there are so many rhetorical and topical intersections between extremist and conservative media, this makes it essentially impossible to devise an algorithm that would not disproportionately impact conservatives.

A similar dynamic exists between Republican politicians and fact-checking organizations. Conservatives simply cannot compute the idea that maybe GOP officials get fact-checked more because their beliefs and rhetoric are less factual.

Facebook can't publicly admit this reality because that would expose them to charges of being "biased" or "unfair." But in truth, conservative media have enormous, fundamental problems which no conservative journalist ever wants to confront. It's easier to whine about evil libs.