

TikTok: Video Propaganda and the Attempted Radicalization of Gen Z

TikTok, an interactive video creation and sharing platform, has taken the social media landscape by storm. In just five years, it has grown to 1.5 billion users, mostly children and teenagers (Weimann and Masri, 2020, p. 4). While research on the presence of extremist propaganda is well developed regarding other social media platforms, little work has been done on TikTok to date. However, the rapid growth of the TikTok user base, its focus on participatory media powered by artificial intelligence, and its predominantly youthful user community make the platform a useful way for extremist propagandists to recruit children and teens (Weimann and Masri, 2020, p. 10). At the same time, concerns over, and cases of, the radicalization of children and teens, particularly in the growing white supremacist extremist space, are increasing due to the large amounts of time people are spending online during the COVID-19 pandemic (Grierson, 2021). This presentation describes our research on TikTok as a site for spreading digital propaganda and radicalization. Methodologically, our presentation discusses our team's process for collecting and evaluating extremist TikTok video content and its related commentary. Crucially, our findings show intent to radicalize children and teens based on users' public sharing of tactics and strategies for spreading propaganda, avoiding detection and removal, and increasing the popularity of their content. While the public commentary derives specifically from extremist QAnon conspiracy materials and discussion, we argue that the mechanisms outlined in our findings can act as a framework for analyzing the social media manipulation tactics of other extremist groups.

Grierson, J. (2021): Lockdown blamed as more under-18s held for terror offences in UK, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/21/lockdown-blamed-as-under-18s-terrorism-offences-coronavirus>

Weimann, G. and Masri, N. (2020): Research Note: Spreading Hate on TikTok, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2020.1780027