

## EXPLORING ALGORITHMIC RECOMMENDATIONS

### What's "Up Next" on YouTube?

#### Background

During the 2016 US Presidential election, media sociologist Zeynep Tufecki was working on an article about then-candidate Donald J. Trump's campaign messaging and how it appealed to his supporters. In order to confirm some quotes that she wanted to use in the article, Tufecki visited the popular video-sharing website YouTube and watched videos of Trump's campaign rallies. Then, something strange happened: on subsequent visits, YouTube recommended other videos that it thought she might be interested in watching, including extremist, white supremacist content. YouTube had not served Tufecki this sort of content before, and so she hypothesized that her

recent search and viewing history had influenced the service's recommendation algorithm. She decided to do an experiment of sorts by creating a new YouTube user account and watching videos of then-candidates Bernie Sanders' and Hillary Clinton's campaign rallies. Sure enough, YouTube began recommending more videos for her to watch, but this time they were more leftist-oriented conspiracy theories. Tufecki concluded, "It seems as if you are never 'hard core' enough for YouTube's recommendation algorithm. It promotes, recommends and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes." (You can read her full story here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html>).



#### Activity

Let's experiment with YouTube's recommendation algorithm to see how "quickly" the service will recommend more radical and extremist content for you to consume.

- Break into groups of 3-5.
- Open any web browser and navigate to YouTube.com. If you already have a YouTube account, be sure to *sign out* of your account before doing any searches.
- Enter a search term related to a current news topic, e.g., "immigration," "trade deal," "impeachment," "ISIS," etc. (If you need inspiration, try searching for "top news topics today" on Google and choosing from one of the news media websites that appears in the search results).
- Click on the first video returned in the search results. For this activity, do NOT click on any videos that have an "Ad" symbol next to the channel name. Take note of:
  1. The source of the video (i.e., the "channel" that posted it).
  2. The *exact* title of the video.

3. The content of the video (e.g., Is it a news report? A conversation or debate? An opinion piece?)
  4. How you would characterize the perspective expressed in the video (e.g., Is it “biased” or “unbiased”? Is it “mainstream” or “extreme”?)? What specific elements led you to characterize it this way?
- Then, click on the “Up Next” suggested video on the righthand side of the screen. Repeat the previous steps, taking note of source, title, content, etc.
  - Repeat this process at least eight more times so that you have navigated through a total of ten videos.
  - Now, return to the YouTube home page and search for the *same* term again. Take note of whether or not you get the same first result. Regardless, click on the first result and repeat the process of clicking through “Up Next” suggestions. Are the videos that YouTube recommends to you different or the same?

Discuss:

- Where did your search lead? Did it stay on the same topic, or did it drift into different topics?
- What kind of sources/channels were most recommended (e.g., News outlets? YouTube personalities/pundits? Personal accounts?)?
- Were the perspectives that you encountered consistent or diverse?
- Did the content that YouTube suggested to you get progressively more “extreme”? How did you group distinguish “mainstream” from “extreme”? In other words, what kind of characteristics made you categorize a video as “extreme”?