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Assessing How TikTok's Algorithm Generates Political Content Recommendations and the Implications for the Youth Demographic

A Partnered Research Project Between Civdem@MAC and the Samara Centre for Democracy

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Background

- The research is focused primarily on how the algorithmic personalized content driven nature of certain platforms, namely TikTok, impacts the kind of political content that is available/promoted.
- Special focus was placed on the youth demographic, for a number of reasons.
  - Chief among these reasons was the high degree of engagement with the political sphere using online platforms observed within the youth demographic.
  - We believe this presented the possibility of spread of mis/disinformation, the spread of polarizing content, and a disenchantment with the political system which could exasperate pre-existing issues, including the observed trend of low voter turnout among the demographic.

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What We Did

- To study the precise nature of the algorithm, we were faced with a number of challenges, with the most significant one being isolating the two main variables we believed could be impacting the personalized content individuals are delivered on their "for-you page" (FYP).
  - The first of these variables was age, and the second was engagement with content.
- So, we conducted three experiments.
  - The first involved creating two "virgin" profiles, one 18 years old, and one 40 years old, and comparing the personalized content they were delivered on their respective FYPs.
    - This would help establish whether there exists a difference between the kind of content delivered based on age.
  - The second involved conducting the same experiment, but with two fresh profiles, both 18 years old. This time, the profiles each searched "Canadian Politics", and liked the 10 most relevant search results TikTok presented them with. Then, we returned to the FYP, and compared the personalized content delivered to these profiles to the profiles from the first experiment.

- This would help us establish whether there exists a difference between the kind of content delivered based on engagement.
  - The third involved repeating the second experiment, but with a fresh profile of age 40. The results were then compared with the results of the second experiment.
    - This would help us establish if, assuming engagement is a factor in influencing the kind of content, whether age could also potentially be a factor.

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What We Found

- The first experiment revealed very little difference between the FYP of the fresh profiles of different ages, with a broad range of topics seen in both. This indicated that age is not a significant variable in determining the content that is chosen to be delivered to individuals.
- The second experiment revealed that engagement with political content resulted in a significant amount of the personalized content delivered becoming political in nature, at nearly half of the content of both FYPs.
  - Of this, a significant portion was found to be inflammatory political content.
- The third experiment results were nearly identical to the second, indicating little difference based on age, instead suggesting that engagement is the primary determinant of content personalization.

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Going Forward

- There are a number of avenues for further research this revealed.
- Firstly, repeating a similar study on a larger scale, with larger sample sizes, would be beneficial in ascertaining the findings of our study, as the scope of our study was rather limited.
- Another Important avenue to explore would be why content that is inflammatory in nature seemed to be promoted disproportionately, and the potential negative impacts that has.
  - Beyond the general impacts, specific focus can be placed on the youth demographic, for the reasons listed above.
  - Further research can then be conducted into ways to remedy this issue, by addressing the specific vulnerabilities that were found within the demographic.

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