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Deplatforming: Following extreme Internet celebrities to Telegram and alternative social media

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Abstract
Extreme, anti-establishment actors are being characterized increasingly as 'dangerous individuals' by the social media platforms that once aided in making them into 'Internet celebrities'. These individuals (and sometimes groups) are being 'deplatformed' by the leading social media companies such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube for such offences as 'organised hate'. Deplatforming has prompted debate about 'liberal big tech' silencing free speech and taking on the role of editors, but also about the questions of whether it is effective and for whom. The research reported here follows certain of these Internet celebrities to Telegram as well as to a larger alternative social media ecology. It enquires empirically into some of the arguments made concerning whether deplatforming 'works' and how the deplatformed use Telegram. It discusses the effects of deplatforming for extreme Internet celebrities, alternative and mainstream social media platforms and the Internet at large. It also touches upon how social media companies' deplatforming is affecting critical social media research, both into the substance of extreme speech as well as its audiences on mainstream as well as alternative platforms.

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Introduction: Deplatforming on social media

Deplatforming, or the removal of one's account on social media for breaking platform rules, has recently been on the rise. It is gaining attention as an antidote to the so-called toxicity of online communities and the mainstreaming of extreme speech, or "vitriolic exchange on Internet-enabled media" that "push the boundaries of acceptable norms of public culture" (Pohjonen and Udupa, 2017). It is also stirring a discussion about the 'liberal bias' of US tech giants implementing the bans (Bilton, 2019; Mulhall, 2019). In the past few years, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and other platforms have all suspended and removed a variety of individuals and groups, comprising, according to one accounting, 'white nationalists', 'anti-semites', 'alt-right' adherents, 'neo-nazis', 'hate groups' and others (Kraus, 2018). Many of those who have been deplatformed are on the far right of the ideological spectrum, and certain of them could be described as extreme Internet celebrities, such as Milo Yiannopoulos and Alex Jones, whose removals have had a significant impact on their visibility, the maintenance of their fan bases and the flow of their income streams. Yiannopoulos has claimed to have become bankrupt by deplatforming, which has included cancellations of a book deal and college campus appearances (Beauchamp, 2018; Maurice, 2019). Jones has seen the view counts and seemingly the impact of his posts and videos decline (Wong, 2018).

Deplatformings have been widely reported in the tech news and beyond (Martineau, 2019). When Yiannopoulos, Jones, Laura Loomer and Paul Joseph Watson were removed from Facebook and Instagram in 2019 for being 'dangerous individuals' engaged or involved in 'organised hate' and/or 'organized violence' (Facebook, 2019), it drew widespread reaction, including the story of how Facebook announced the ban some hours prior to its implementation, allowing the deplatformed individuals to post notices on their pages, redirecting their audience to other platforms (Martineau, 2019). Laura Loomer, for one, announced her Telegram channel; Alex Jones pointed to his websites. The migration from mainstream to alternative social media platforms was underway.

At the same time, protests from these individuals and their followers have been staged on the platforms that have removed them. Loomer, the 'white nationalist' banned from Twitter for a 'racist attack' on a Muslim US congresswoman, handcuffed herself to the front door of the corporation's office in New York city, livestreaming her plight and her views on the suppression of 'conservative' viewpoints on a supporter's Periscope account (itself a Twitter service). Having been banned, other users switched to platforms friendly to their politics, such as Gab, a Twitter alternative that upvotes and downvotes posts like Reddit. It has become known as a 'haven for white supremacists' and for its defence of free speech (Ohlheiser and Shapira, 2018; Zannettou et al., 2018). It also positions itself as distinct from the 'left-leaning Big Social monopoly' (Coaston, 2018).

When deplatformed social media celebrities migrate to alternative platforms, these sites are given a boost through media attention and increases in user counts.

Milo Yiannopoulos initially turned to Gab after his account was removed on Twitter (Benson, 2016), and around the same time Alex Jones joined it 'with great fanfare' (Ohlheiser, 2016). Indeed, when Twitter conducted a so-called 'purge' of alt-right accounts in 2016, Gab gained tens of thousands of users in a short time. It is continually described as a favoured platform of expression for extremism, including for the shooter in the Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018 who announced his intended acts there (Nguyen, 2018). Gab drew over a million hits, after it became known that a mass shooter posted his manifesto there (Coaston, 2018).

But mainstream social media drives more traffic to extreme content than alternative social media platforms or other websites, at least in the case when Alex Jones was banned from Facebook and YouTube, as mentioned earlier. His InfoWars posts, now only available on his websites (and a sprinkling of alternative social media platforms, as we come to), saw a decline in traffic by one-half (Nicas, 2018). When deplatforming leads to such declines in attention, questions arise about its effectiveness. Is it indeed a viable means to detoxify mainstream social media and the Internet more broadly, and/or does it prompt the individuals to migrate to other platforms with more welcoming and 'oxygen-giving' extreme publics?

Effectiveness of deplatforming

There has been some scholarly attention paid to the effectiveness of shutting down particularly offensive online communities, such as the subreddits r/fatpeoplehate and r/coontown, banned by Reddit in 2015 for violating its harassment policies. It was found that the shutdowns worked, in that a proportion of offending users appeared to leave the platform (for Voat, an alternative to Reddit), and the subreddits that inherited those migrating from those spaces did not see a significant increase in extreme speech (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017). Indeed, the closing of those communities was beneficial *for Reddit*, but less research has been performed about the effectiveness of the ban for the health of social media or the Internet at large. The Reddit study's authors reported that not only did Reddit make these users 'someone else's problem', but also perhaps pushed them to 'darker corners of the Internet' (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017).

The debate concerning the effectiveness of deplatforming has arguments lined up on both sides. For those arguing that it does not work, deplatforming is said to draw attention to suppressed materials (Streisand effect), harden the conviction of the followers, and put social media companies in the position of an arbiter of speech. For those arguing that deplatforming is effective, it is said that it detoxes both subspaces (such as subreddits) as well as platforms more generally, produces a decline in audience and drives extreme voices to spaces that have less oxygen-giving capacity, thereby containing their impact. The Reddit study indeed found that both the subreddits and the platform more generally saw a decline in the type of harassment found on r/fatpeoplehate and r/coontown, but less is known about the alternative platforms to which extreme users may turn.

Telegram as 'dark corner of the Internet'

Apart from Gab and perhaps Voat (to which deplatformed Pizzagate, incel and QAnon subreddit users are said to have migrated), Telegram is another of those so-called darker corners of the Internet (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019). It is an instant messaging app, founded in 2013 by the same Internet entrepreneurs who launched VKontakte, the social media platform popular in Russia. Telegram has a reputation, whether or not well-founded, for highly secure messaging, having notoriously been listed by ISIS as 'safe' and having themselves championed privacy upon its founding that coincided with the US state spying revelations by Edward Snowden (Weimann, 2016). Indeed, the founders started Telegram so communications could not be monitored by governments, including the Russian authorities, who pursued the founder on charges of tax avoidance until he fled the country (Cook, 2018). The Russian state later accused Telegram of enabling terrorists because it would not turn over users' encrypted messages, leading to a ban of the application in Russia. The founders, and their programming team, are themselves self-exemplary of privacy-enablers, for they require secure communication, and have moved from location to location to elude what the founder calls 'unnecessary influence' (Thornhill, 2015). As I come to, encrypted communication is one affordance that makes Telegram attractive to certain user groups.

How does Telegram appeal to its users, including those who have been deplatformed for violating platform rules? Telegram not only has the reputation but also the affordances that would be attractive to those seeking something similar to 'social privacy', or the capacity to retain control over what is known about oneself while still participating (and becoming popular) on social media (Raynes-Goldie, 2010). On platforms such as Facebook, such a user is public-facing at the outset, and subsequently, makes deft use of aliases, privacy settings as well as account and timeline grooming. That is how social privacy is performed. Telegram, however, is something of a hybrid system, and in contradistinction to Facebook, it leads with protected messaging, and follows with the social. That is, it is in the first place a messaging app, where one has an account, and can message others and join groups, first private ones (by default) but also public ones. It also has some elements of social media, whereby one may create a channel (public by default) and have others subscribe to it.

The apt deployment of Telegram would seem to conceptually invert social privacy. The app offers protected communication, appealing to a private user, rather than to the public-facing user, seeking publicity (De Zeeuw and Tuters, forthcoming). 'Private sociality' may be a term that captures operating in private chats and private group chats both for the private user (not necessarily seeking publicity) as well as the masked user (who may seek attention). One can operate in private mode and still participate.

Second, apart from only private spaces in which to organize, recruit, chat and so forth, the Telegram user may still seek publicity. Here the use of a channel is

significant for it allows the building of a following. Similar to YouTube, one can broadcast to subscribers.

Telegram thereby could be said to reconcile dual desires of protection and publicity by offering private messaging and broadcasting. It thereby appears to go some way towards resolving the 'online extremists' dilemma', a variation on the 'terrorist's dilemma', which concerns balancing 'operational security and public outreach' (Clifford and Powell, 2019; Shapiro, 2013).

Telegram, as mentioned earlier, has had other extremist users who are often discussed together with the Internet celebrities in journalistic pieces (Robins-Early, 2019). In a description of its use by ISIS, the app's combination of features is described as follows: 'Telegram's public-facing "channels" and private messaging "chats" make it a "dual-use" weapon [...]' (Counter-Extremism Project, 2017). The groups broadcast to followers on channels and recruit and organize through one-to-one chats, which are secure. One need not maintain a telephone number to use the service; to sign up one can create an account with a temporary 'burner phone' or an Internet proxy phone number, validating the account through a one-time SMS message (Yayla and Speckhard, 2017). Once set up, ISIS accounts or those from other such groups are not removed with the rapidity that it occurs on Twitter or Facebook; many stay up for months or much longer (Shehabat et al., 2017). Content also endures. On Telegram, there is the capacity to upload large video files; once uploaded, the videos are linked from channels, and those links persist unless the channel is closed or the user deletes the file, making it a reliable source for recruiting materials, but also a space for archiving content that may have been deplatformed elsewhere.

The deplatformed and Telegram

For the deplatformed, Telegram's reputation may be appealing. It affords 'protected speech' by being permissive of extreme content. It also keeps content up and available, thereby allaying threats of deletion, a key concern for those who have been deplatformed, and saw their content removed. Telegram also offers means to build a following, and broadcast to large numbers of users (as on YouTube and Twitter). Like other messaging apps including WhatsApp, Telegram has groups, though it does not limit their size as much. Groups can have up to 200,000 users (compared to 256 for WhatsApp), and channels can have an unlimited number of subscribers. Telegram also enables large clusters of groups, in that one can forward a message to an unlimited number of groups, as opposed to the smaller number on WhatsApp, a restriction that received attention in the wake of misinformation campaigns around elections in India (and Brazil). (On WhatsApp India has a special limit of 5 forwards, compared to 20 globally.) In all, Telegram can compete for the deplatformed users by offering the kinds of features seemingly sought by those seeking protected speech, archiving as well as a following. It is considered both a 'protected space' as well as a 'publicity space' (Nagy and Neff, 2015).

This study empirically examines the use of the platform by extreme Internet celebrities that have migrated to it, inquiring into certain arguments made concerning whether deplatforming 'works' and how those who have been deplatformed from mainstream social media use an alternative Telegram (DeCook, 2019). It discusses the effects of deplatforming for extreme internet celebrities, alternative and mainstream social media platform, the Internet at large as well as researchers. It does so first by mapping the alternative social media ecology by creating a bi-partite graph of select extreme Internet celebrities and the platforms they use. Subsequently, the focus is on Telegram, for which a scraper is built and deployed to collect posts made on public channels by select extreme Internet celebrities who have migrated to it. The Telegram analysis utilizes platform data (such as view counts), extreme language detection (hatebase.org) as well as textual analysis (keywords in context). It does so to begin to examine empirically some of the arguments made about the effectiveness of deplatforming.

From the point of view of celebrities newly migrated to Telegram, is it an effective alternative to mainstream platforms? Do audiences remain robust, or thin? Are the celebrities as active as previously? Do they become more extreme in the language they use? We found active celebrities but thinning audiences; we also determined that their language was mellowing.

Mainstream platforms that deplatform 'dangerous individuals' may lose a particular audience consuming extreme speech. Do the audiences also depart the platforms, or do they remain, consuming other materials? One may begin to answer the question by examining the celebrity discussion about mainstream platforms on Telegram. One may also examine the hyperlinks from Telegram to the platforms. Which mainstream platforms remain of relevance to the celebrities, and which fade from interest? We found that Facebook and Instagram have been successful in that they have become unattractive to extreme celebrities, whereas YouTube and Twitter remain significant.

The research also maps out the alternative platform network to which deplatformed social media celebrities have migrated, and how they discuss certain of the destinations. We found that most alternative platforms are used 'instrumentally' in the sense that they are merely pointed to, rather than described for their particular affordances. The exception is Telegram which appears to be a refuge, where multiple extreme celebrities have found a soft landing.

Mapping an alternative social media ecosystem

In order to map an alternative social media ecosystem, the research project compiled a list of deplatformed social media celebrities, mainly from the United States and the United Kingdom.[1] At the same time, a list of alternative social media platforms also was built, initially from those mentioned in right-wing public groups on Telegram and supplemented through a so-called associative query snowballing technique, where search engines are queried for pairs of alternative social media platform names (Rogers, 2018). Finally, each celebrity was sought on the

alternative platforms. The connections between celebrities and platforms were subsequently visualized in a network graph using Gephi, and interpreted through visual network analysis (Venturini et al., 2015). Three findings stand out (see Figure 1).

The map shows the centrality of BitChute (alternative to YouTube), Minds (alternative to Facebook), Gab (alternative to Twitter) as well as Telegram (the hybrid messaging and broadcasting platform), in the sense that a majority of the celebrities maintain presences there. Second, one may observe the revival of the web as a potential destination for extreme celebrity content. Whether by pointing to personal websites or new subscription services such as freespeech.tv, the web comes (back) into view for these users. Some years on from the platform-ization of the web, or the mass migration of activity from websites to social media, extreme users are turning their attention there anew (Rogers, 2013). Third, there are two mainstream platforms that remain central, since a number of the users under study have active accounts there, having as yet not been deplatformed. Even as their replacements are central in the alternative social media network, YouTube and Twitter remain of relevance as a destination for extreme content and their audiences.

Finally, it should be pointed that the alternative social media network comprises more than 'the social', including for example donation and payment processing as well as merchandise destinations. The relevance of those types of alternatives became clear initially when mapping which platforms deplatformed the celebrities (see Figure 2). As PayPal and other payment sites remove particular individuals, alternatives have emerged, however much both the scope of the deplatforming as well as migration to the alternative appear still marginal.

The overall question of the robustness and longevity of the alternative network remains an open one, but at least for Telegram, the research was able to make some initial determinations concerning the question of whether the extreme voices shrivel or thrive there despite having been deplatformed by mainstream social media.

Scraping Telegram for extreme celebrity activity

A Telegram scraper was built and employed to extract, through the platform's API, the contents of celebrity public channels.[2] Here the analysis concerns the extremity of the language employed, posting activity measures and post view counts, longitudinally, since the so-called 'purge' of 'dangerous individuals' from Facebook and Instagram (in particular) in May 2019, a 6-month time frame in all. The determination of extreme speech benefits from the deployment of hatebase. org, the repository of (so-called ambiguous and unambiguous) extreme and hateful speech (Davidson et al., 2017). In the celebrity posts, outlinks to other platforms are counted, in order to gain an indication of which mainstream platforms are still considered relevant destinations. Apart from these counts and scores, the project also produced an analysis of celebrity discussions about mainstream and
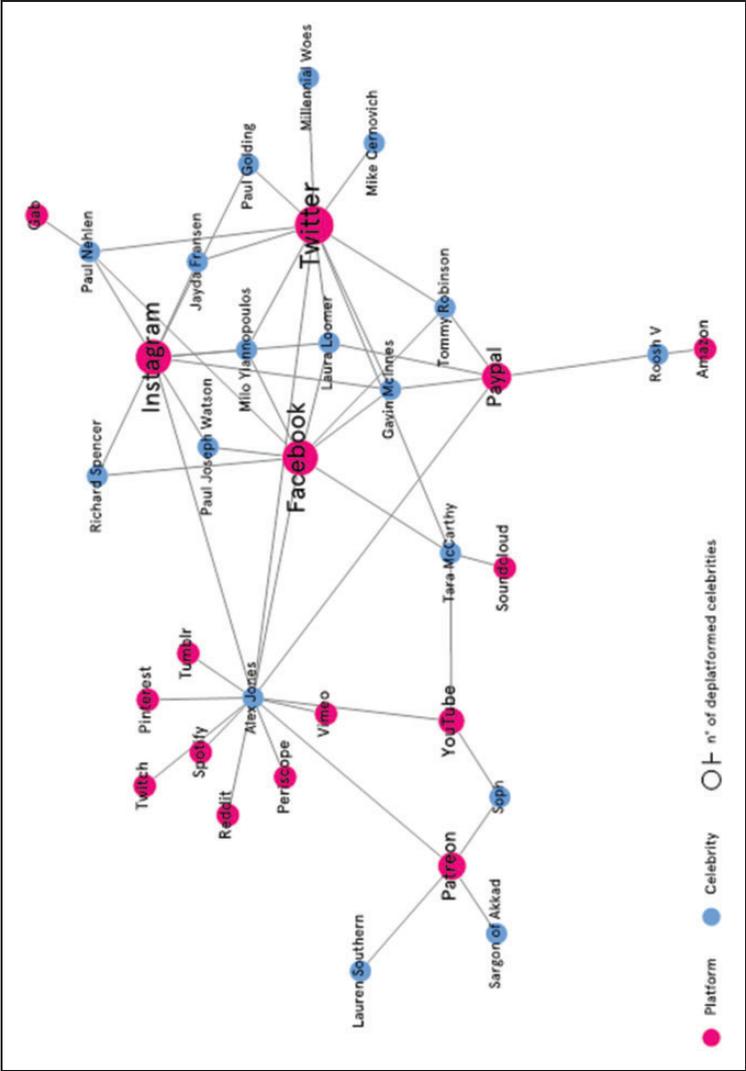
Figure 1. Extreme internet celebrities and the platforms where they remain or to which they have migrated. Bi-partite graph of extreme internet celebrities and the platforms for which they have accounts. October 2019.

Figure 2. Extreme internet celebrities and the platforms that deplatformed them. Bipartite graph of extreme internet celebrities and the platforms for which they no longer have accounts (or have been 'demonetized' by them). October 2019.

alternative platforms (with keyword in context word trees). We thematized these discussions, finding how deplatforming and replatforming (or migrating to alternative platforms) are framed.

When the extreme Internet celebrities migrated to Telegram (and other alternative platforms), one question concerned whether they would be able to sustain themselves there, given that the audiences are both smaller (as we found), and thus, the interaction with the fan base or following less intense. Quantitatively, the audiences on the new platforms have thinned (see Figure 3). Of interest is the consistency of the celebrities in their posting, despite the overall audience strength. Indeed, for most, it appears the 'permanent updating culture' has not been affected by platform migration (Jerslev, 2016). There have been some changes in behaviour, however. After a flurry of extreme language posted on alternative platforms in the immediate aftermath of the May 'purge', its usage has flagged (see Figure 4). Analytically deploying the 'unambiguous' extreme and hateful speech in the hatebase repository, we found that there were increasingly fewer mentions of them, generally, by most celebrities.[3] Whether one would expect a decrease in the usage of extreme speech, especially given what could be thought of as a less moderated space, is not clear, though in the Reddit study mentioned earlier those users who were forced to migrate to other spaces also appear to use more mild language.

Which platforms benefit from deplatforming?

The research on how the extreme Internet celebrities describe how they have been affected by deplatforming proceeded by querying both mainstream and alternative platform names in the celebrities' posts, and displaying the platforms as keywords in context, using word trees. The hyperlinks in celebrity posts also were extracted, in order to gain an indication of which platforms have content that is being recommended or at least pointed to. Generally, it was found that Facebook and Instagram are routinely critiqued as sites that do not grant freedom of speech and whose use are generally not in the interests of extreme actors, whereas Twitter and YouTube remain of interest, in the sense that they make appeals for supporters to use the platforms to spread the word, or in the case of YouTube to invite them on their shows (see Figure 5).

The research also examined the hyperlinks made from celebrity Telegram posts, finding that by far the personal websites were most pointed to, followed by Twitter and YouTube (see Figure 6). Instagram and Facebook draw far fewer links. The link analysis provides an indication of which platforms are still relevant, and which less so, both to the celebrities, but presumably to the content the celebrities also find of interest for their audiences. In keeping with the earlier finding of the revival of the web in the map of the alternative social media ecology, here the web emerges again as the most linked-to destination, when the links to the personal websites as well as newly formed subscription platforms are taken collectively. It also shows that Facebook and Instagram are benefitting from the deplatforming activities in the sense that celebrity interest in them has declined, while the other mainstream
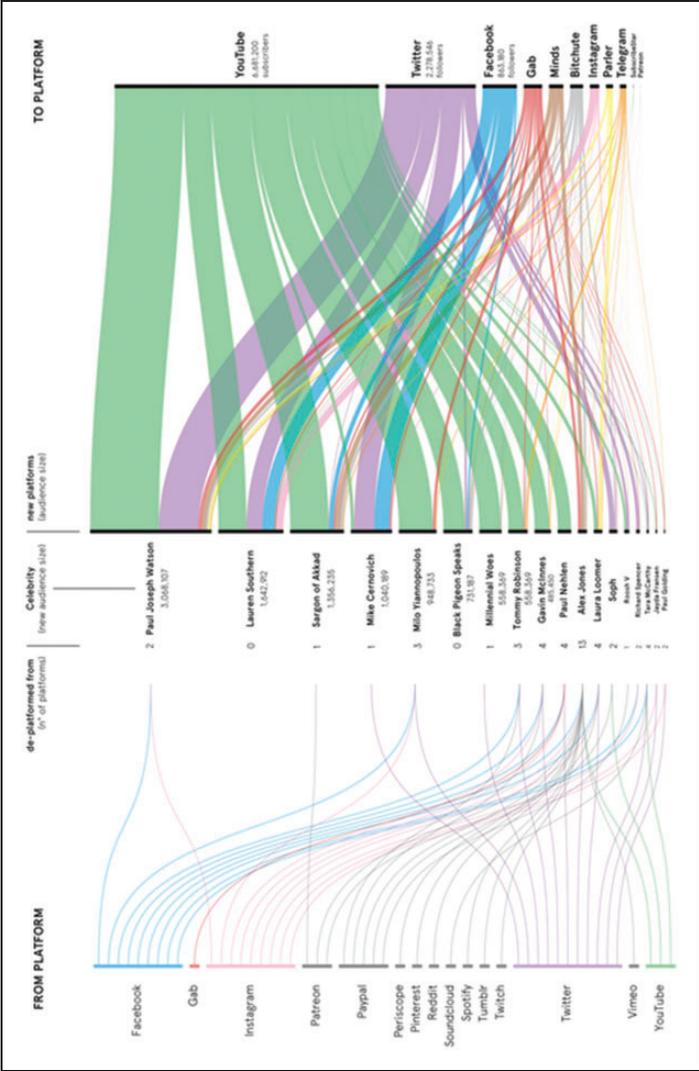
Figure 3. Platform audiences of extreme internet celebrities before and after migration, depicted as Sankey diagram. Data per October 2019.
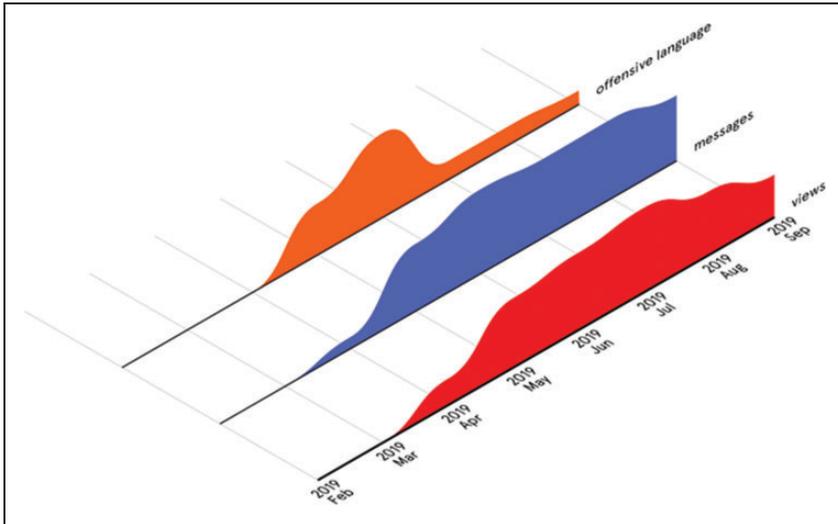
Figure 4. Post counts, post views and extremity of language used by all extreme internet celebrities under study with an account on Telegram, May–October 2019.
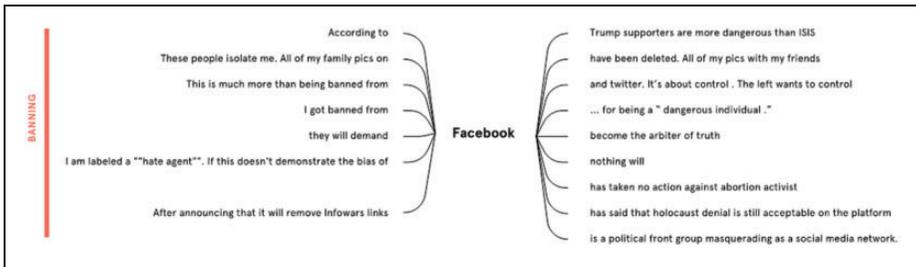

Figure 5. Facebook discussed by extreme internet celebrities who were deplatformed by the social media service. Word trees showing keyword in context from all Telegram posts, May–October 2019.

platforms, Twitter and YouTube, have not seen such a concomitant slump. Indeed, as the discursive analysis of Twitter and YouTube indicate, they both continue to be viewed as resources either for spreading the word, and for broadcasting content (see Figure 7).

Conclusions: Deplatforming effects and researcher migration

This study examines Telegram as a destination for the deplatformed, asking what it has to offer not only to extreme internet celebrities, but also to researchers, who in
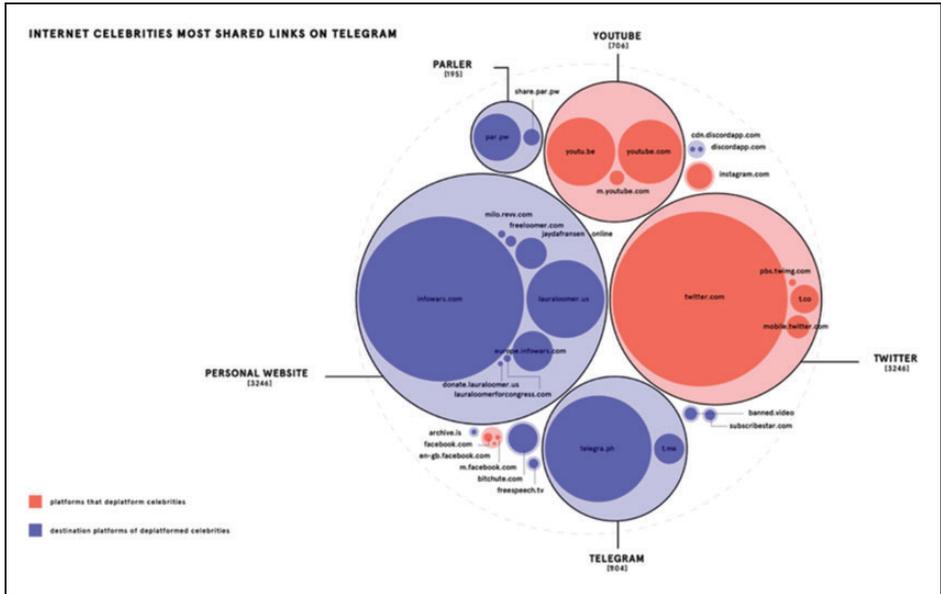
Figure 6. Web outlinks from extreme internet celebrity posts on Telegram, arrayed as circle packing diagram, May–October 2019.
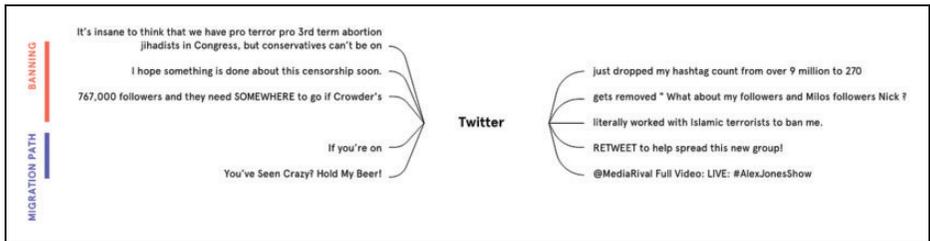

Figure 7. Twitter discussed by extreme internet celebrities who were deplatformed by the social media service. Word trees showing keyword in context from all Telegram channel posts, May–October 2019.

a rather different sense are also being deplatformed, having seen their access to data from mainstream platforms, especially Facebook and Instagram, diminished or removed (Bruns et al., 2018). Should researchers follow the deplatformed to alternative social media, and/or continue to research the mainstream platforms where the data streams have been winnowed and replaced by company-curated data sets? As has been demonstrated, one is able to study the reception of the mainstream platforms through the posts on alternative ones, and gain indications

of the extent to which deplatforming has 'worked' for the mainstream platforms. Such work does not replace examinations of them, but it shows that analysing the one social media site does not need to result only in 'single platform studies' (Rogers, 2019).

Unlike Facebook and Instagram, for researchers Telegram is not 'locked'. Apart from certain rate limiting, the platform allows widespread probing of its public parts, both groups as well as channels.[4] Not only is it possible to study how other platforms are discussed and linked to, but also the extreme voices may be studied, where questions may be posed concerning (at least) two widespread views that have been circulated about the effects of channelling them into an alternative set of platforms friendly to them. Does the content become only more and more extreme? There is also the question of the thinning of audiences, both in gross terms but also over time, and whether the decline in audience strength provides less oxygen and thus decreases activity. As reported, audiences have thinned, activity has remained steady, and the language employed has become milder.

While difficult to determine with certainty, Telegram does not appear to be used by these extreme Internet celebrities for private recruitment, content archiving and other features that appear to make it attractive to those having been deplatformed. Judging from the hyperlink and discursive analysis, Telegram rather is deployed more like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, or Facebook in a broadcasting mode, with short (and frequent) posts put out on public channels.

'Cancel culture' is a contemporary term that describes the larger phenomenon of public vilification for offensive speech or action, largely in social media but also through other forms of deplatforming such as the calling off of a speaking engagement (Bromwich, 2018; McDermott, 2019). One is cancelled by powerful media forces (Coates, 2019), like a television show that had been thriving with niche content and an audience not as sizable as desired. It also has been deployed by extreme Internet celebrities to express victimhood or victimization. Indeed, when researching how these users describe the mainstream platforms that deplatformed them there are expressions of having been wronged, and also having been asymmetrically (and unfairly) treated, when banned. Being cancelled by Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and/or YouTube has stark consequences for the maintenance of a fan base, following and revenue stream, as has been reported. Migrating to alternative social media may not offer as much. Platform cancelling at the same time also demonstrates a shift in what is considered acceptable on social media. Unacceptable content and individuals are removed.

Here it is important to return to the question of the 'locked' platforms, asking how to research the delistings, deletions and other cancellations when the data to do so on mainstream platforms become unavailable. Following the extreme internet celebrities to alternative social media platforms provides one manner to work on the question of the effects and effectiveness of deplatforming, albeit from celebrity points of view as well as from their posting and linking behaviour. The alternative social media ecology also could be studied for the materials no longer available on the mainstream platforms, having been moved and archived there.

While there are these and other research opportunities, following the extreme internet celebrities to their new media does not substitute for critical mainstream platform monitoring, and the study of what is deemed worthy of cancellation.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. During the research period in October 2019, a series of Italian individuals and groups were deplatformed by Facebook and other social media sites, though they did not immediately migrate, or at least announce their movements, to alternative platforms.
2. The capacity to scrape public groups is also a feature of the tool.
3. The extreme Internet celebrities may have mellowed in their explicit utterances, according to the hatebase analysis, but they may still trigger hateful reactions through the use of implicit language. Moreover, the analysis here relies only on the celebrities' speech rather than the replies and comments.
4. To subscribe to a private channel or access a private group, the researcher needs an invitation (or invite link) from the administrator. Researchers have studied such groups, for example, in an analysis of the culture of revenge porn sharing (Semenzin and Bainotti, 2020) as well as ISIS lone wolf recruitment (Shehabat et al., 2017). There it is argued that encrypted communication enables the sharing of more violent content.

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