

How to Measure the Effects of Algorithms

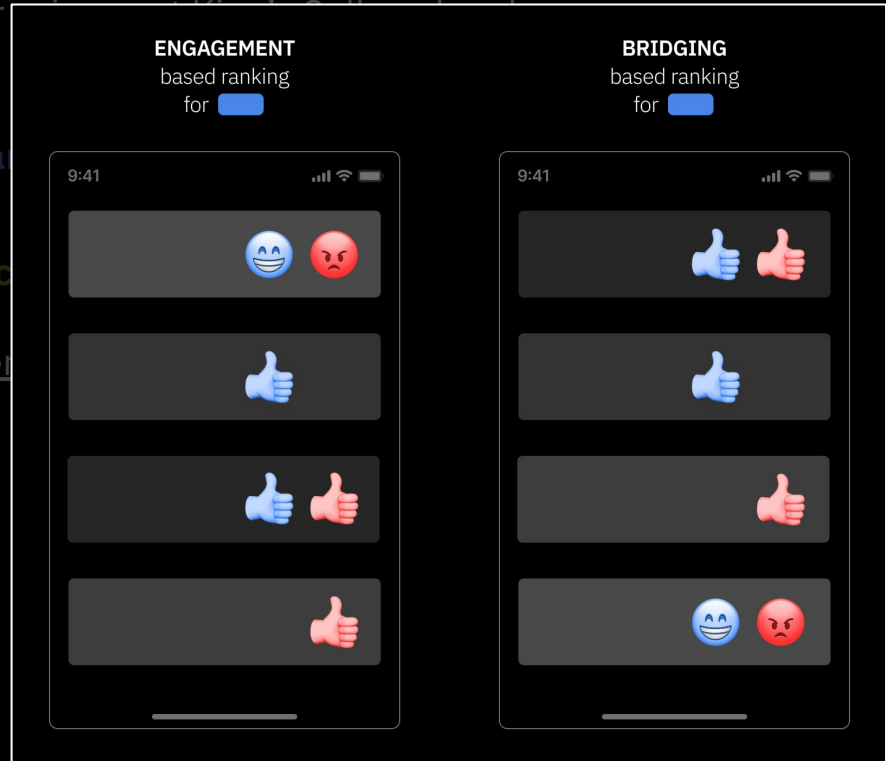
Luke Thorburn
March 2024

Me

- PhD student in computer science at King's College London.
- Various projects:
 - **Bridging-Based Ranking**
bridging.systems
 - **Understanding Recommenders**
CHAI, UC Berkeley
medium.com/understanding-recommenders

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 - **Understanding Recommendation**
CHAI, UC Berkeley
[medium.com/under](https://medium.com/understanding-recommendation)



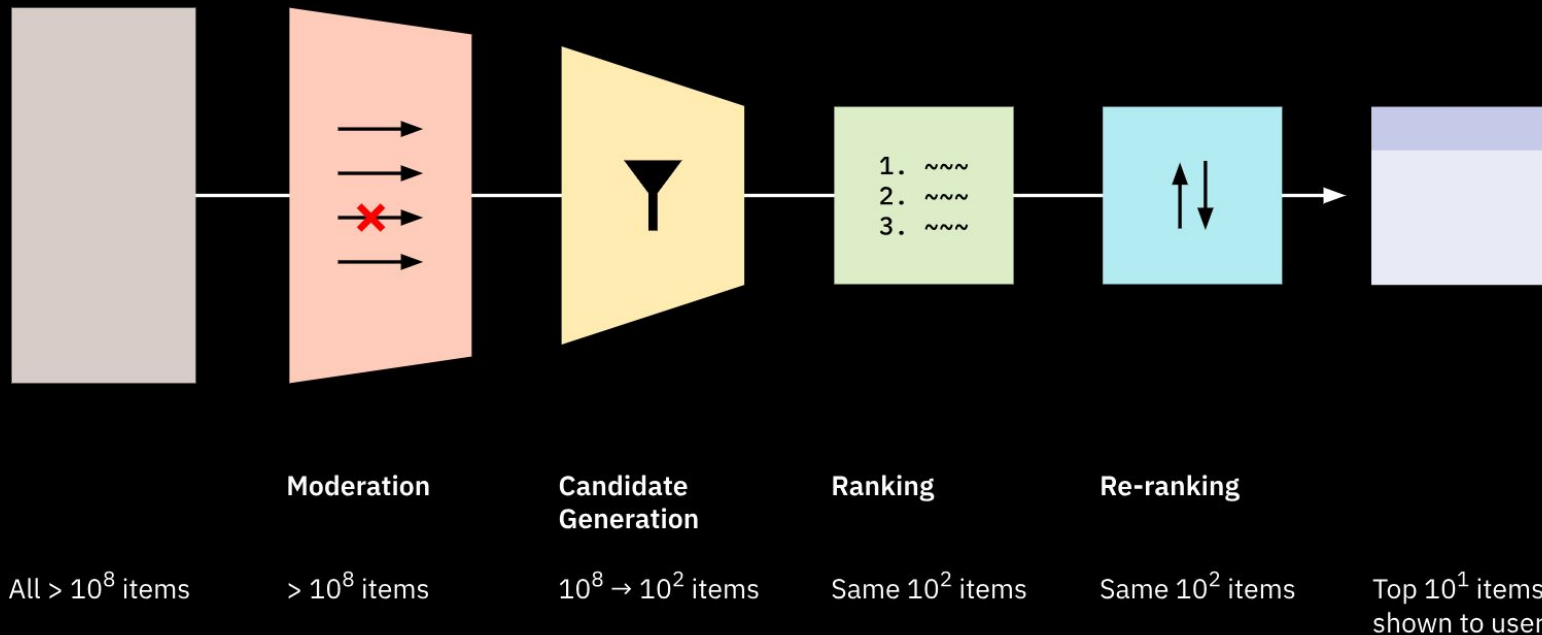
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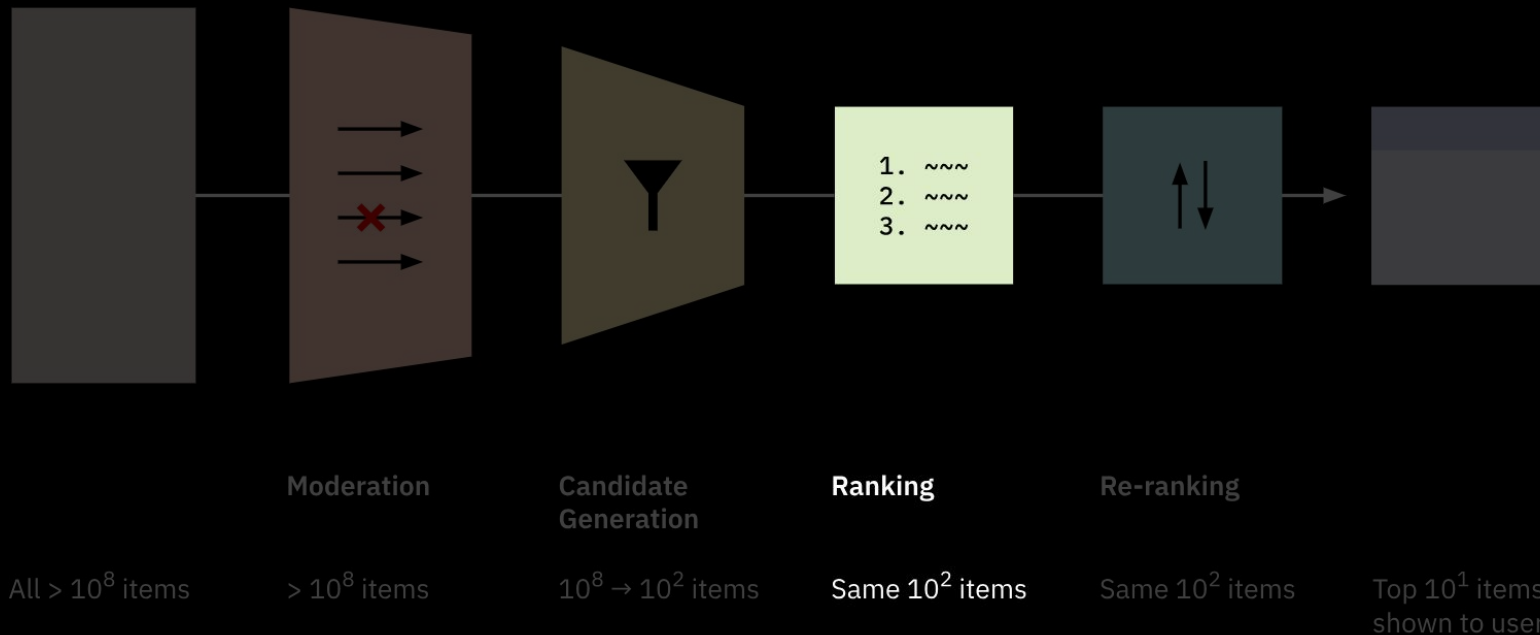
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bridging.systems
 - **Understanding Recommenders**
CHAI, UC Berkeley
medium.com/understanding-recommenders
 - Social media regulation
 - AI governance
 - De-escalation of AI policy discourse

Recommender Systems



Recommender Systems



Recommender Systems

$$\begin{aligned} \text{value} = & 1 \cdot \text{Pr}(\textit{like}) + 3 \cdot \text{Pr}(\textit{comment}) + 10 \cdot \text{Pr}(\textit{share}) \\ & + 4 \cdot (\textit{expected dwell time}) - 6 \cdot \text{Pr}(\textit{fake account}) \\ & - 7 \cdot \text{Pr}(\textit{low quality news}) - 10 \cdot \text{Pr}(\textit{clickbait}) \end{aligned}$$


Questions people care about

- Are recommenders **harming mental health**?
- Are recommenders **shortening attention spans**?
- Are recommenders **making politics more divisive**?
- Are recommenders **politically biased**?
- Are recommenders **incentivising misinformation**?
- Are recommenders ...

Relevance to your work

- Are recommenders **harming mental health**?
- Are recommenders **shortening attention spans**?
- Are recommenders **making politics more divisive**?
- Are recommenders **politically biased**?
- Are recommenders **incentivising misinformation**?
- Are recommenders ...

Relevance to your work



Governance System

harming mental health?

shortening attention spans?

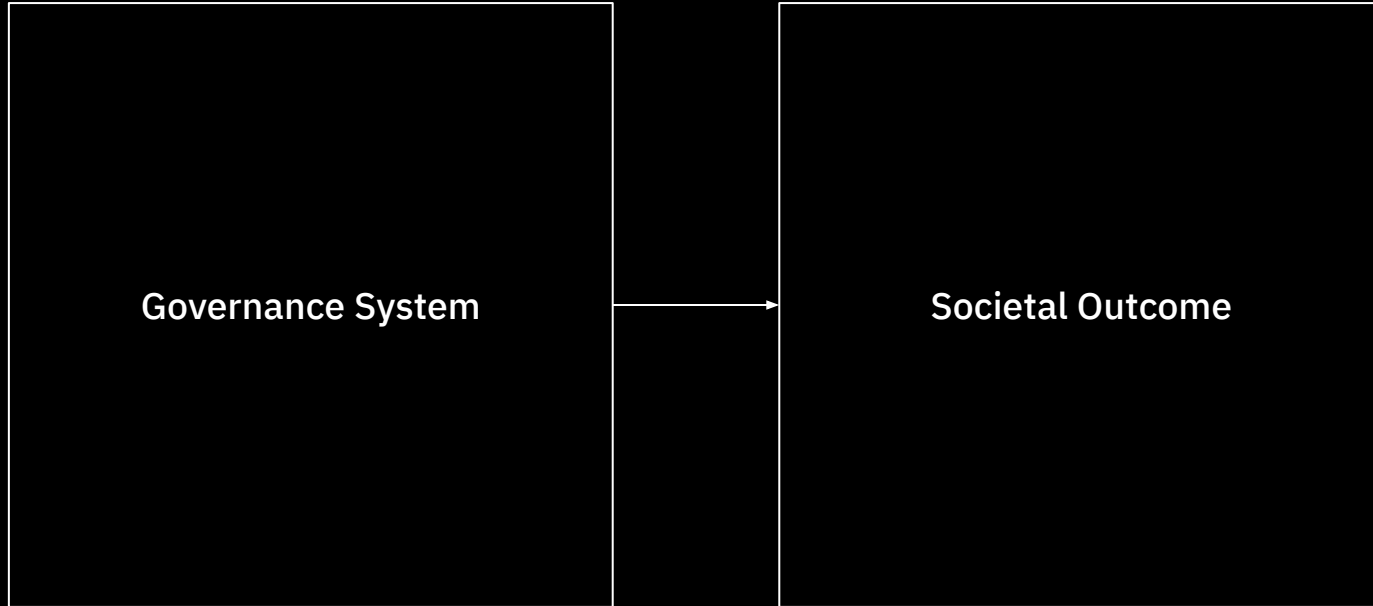
making politics more divisive?

politically biased?

incentivising misinformation?

...

Relevance to your work



Methods

How platforms do it

Regulation

Methods

How platforms do it

Regulation

AVAILABLE STUDY TYPES**MAJOR LIMITATIONS****Without access**

- ★ Simulations
- ★ Off-platform experiments

- Ecological validity

With platform data

- All of the above, plus*
- ★ Observational studies

- Data scope & quality
- Causal inference

With on-platform experiments

- All of the above, plus*
- ★ On-platform experiments

- Ability to generalize
- Isolation of cause/effect
- Ethical considerations

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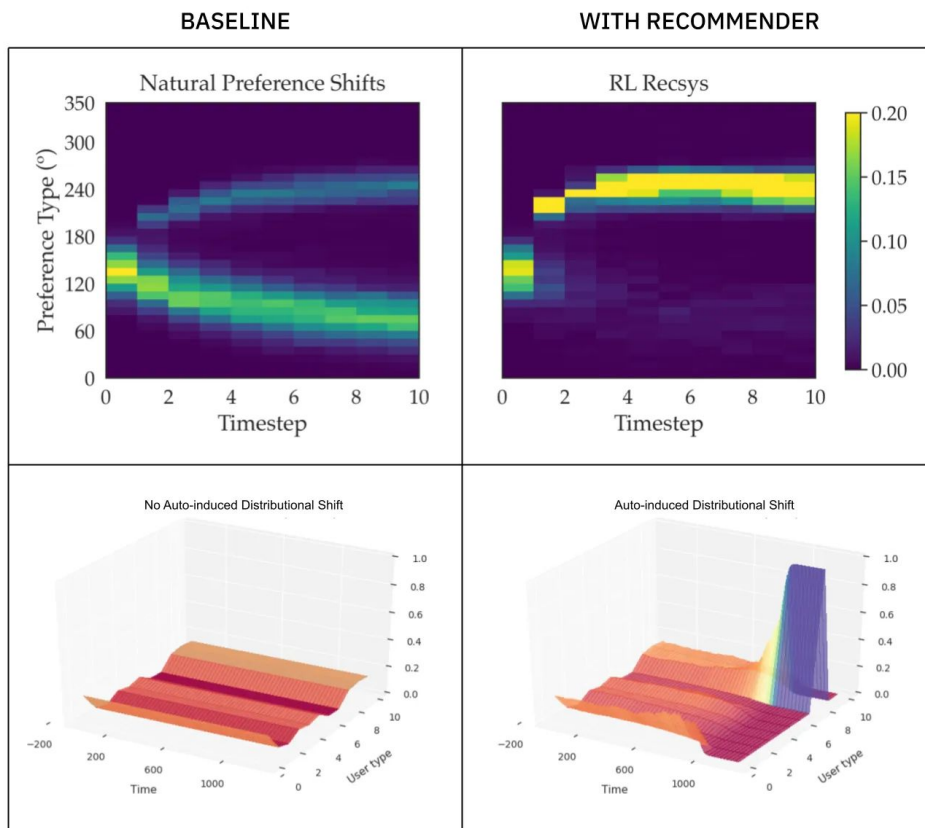
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- Ethical considerations

Without access

With platform

With on-platform experiments

Carroll et al. (2021)



ONS

validity

e & quality
ference

generalize
of cause/effect
nsiderations

Do We Need a Social Media Accelerator?

Christopher A. Bail^{1,2,3}, D. Sunshine Hillygus^{2,3}, Alexander Volfovsky^{4,5},
Max Allamong⁶, Fatima Alqabandi^{1,4}, Diana M.E. Jordan², Graham
Tierney⁴, Christina Tucker², Andrew Trexler^{3,2}, and Austin van Loon^{1,4}

¹Department of Sociology, Duke University

²Department of Political Science, Duke University

³Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University

⁴Department of Statistical Science, Duke University

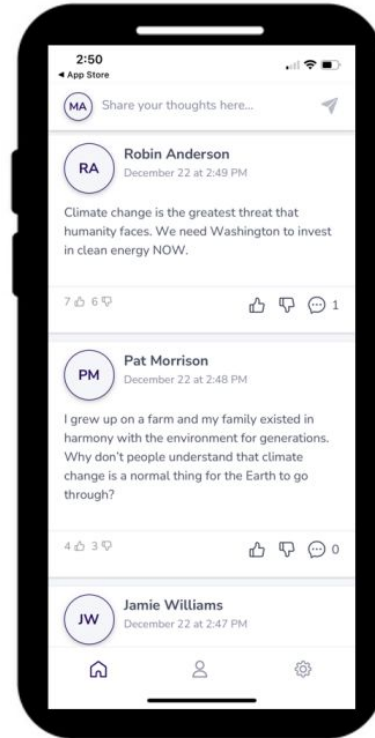
⁵Department of Computer Science, Duke University

⁶Duke Initiative on Survey Methodology, Duke University

December 22, 2023

Social media platforms are central to many of the most pressing questions in public debates today: Have photo and video sharing sites such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram

OR LIMITATIONS



Witho

With p

With on-platform
experiments

All of the above, plus

★ On-platform experiments

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Political content and news are polarized but other content is not in YouTube watch histories

Magdalena Wojcieszak

UC Davis, U of Amsterdam

Rong-Ching (Anna) Chang

Ericka Menchen-Trevino

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51685/jqd.2023.018>

Keywords: polarization,, news, YouTube, echo chambers, partisanship, exposure, selectivity, computational methods

Abstract


Research on Ideological biases and polarization on social media platforms primarily focuses on news and political content. Non-political content, which is vastly more popular, is often overlooked. Because partisanship is correlated with citizens' non-political attitudes and non-political content can carry political cues, we explore whether ideological biases and partisan segregation extend to users' non-political exposures online. We focus on YouTube, one of the most popular platforms. We rely online data from American adults (N = 2,237). From over 129 million visits to over 37 million URLs, we analyze 1,037,392 visits to YouTube videos from 1,874 participants. We identify YouTube channels of 942 news domains, utilize a BERT-based classifier to identify political videos outside news channels, and estimate the ideology of all the videos in our data. We compare Ideological biases in exposure to (a) news, (b) political, and (c) non-political content. We examine

 pdf

Published
2023-11-10

How to Cite

Wojcieszak, M., Chang, R.-C. (Anna), & Menchen-Trevino, E. (2023). Political content and news are polarized but other content is not in YouTube watch histories. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.51685/jqd.2023.018>

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Issue

[Vol. 3 \(2023\)](#)

Section

Articles

License

Copyright (c) 2023 Magdalena Wojcieszak, Rong-Ching (Anna) Chang, Ericka Menchen-Trevino



TIONS

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ope & quality
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o generalize
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considerations



Without access

With platform da

With on-platform
experiments



Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks

William J. Brady , Julian A. Wills, John T. Jost , and Jay J. Van Bavel  [✉](#) [Authors info & Affiliations](#)

Edited by Susan T. Fiske, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, and approved May 23, 2017 (received for review November 15, 2016)

June 26, 2017 | 114 (28) 7313-7318 | <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114>

 120,294 | 365



Significance

Twitter and other social media platforms are believed to have altered the course of numerous historical events, from the Arab Spring to the US presidential election. Online social networks have become a ubiquitous medium for discussing moral and political ideas. Nevertheless, the field of moral psychology has yet to investigate why some moral and political ideas spread more widely than others. Using a large sample of social media communications concerning polarizing issues in public policy debates (gun control, same-sex marriage, climate change), we found that the presence of moral-emotional language in political messages substantially increases their diffusion within (and less so between) ideological group boundaries. These findings offer insights into how moral ideas spread within networks during real political discussion.



Article | [Published: 10 June 2021](#)

Reconsidering evidence of moral contagion in online social networks

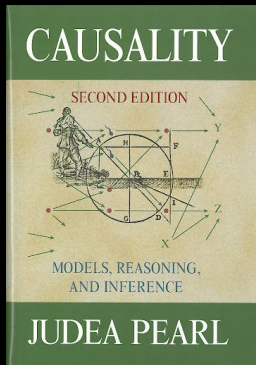
[Jason W. Burton](#) , [Nicole Cruz](#) & [Ulrike Hahn](#)

[Nature Human Behaviour](#) 5, 1629–1635 (2021) | [Cite this article](#)

14k Accesses | 15 Citations | 146 Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

Abstract

The ubiquity of social media use and the digital data traces it produces has triggered a potential methodological shift in the psychological sciences away from traditional, laboratory-based experimentation. The hope is that, by using computational social science methods to analyse large-scale observational data from social media, human behaviour can be studied with greater statistical power and ecological validity. However, current standards of null hypothesis significance testing and correlational statistics seem ill-suited to markedly noisy, high-dimensional social media datasets. We explore this point by probing the moral contagion phenomenon, whereby the use of moral-emotional language increases the probability of message spread. Through out-of-sample prediction, model comparisons and specification curve analyses, we find that the moral contagion model performs no better than an implausible XYZ contagion model. This highlights the risks of using purely correlational evidence from large observational datasets and sounds a cautionary note for psychology's merge with big data.



Process

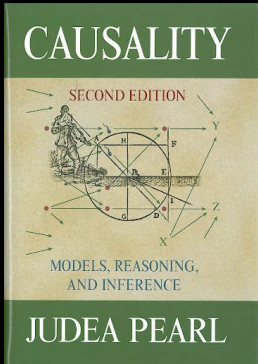
With platform data

With on-platform experiments

AVAILABLE STUDY TYPES

MAJOR LIMITATIONS

<ul style="list-style-type: none">★ Simulations★ Off-platform experiments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ecological validity
<p><i>All of the above, plus</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">★ Observational studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Data scope & quality● Causal inference
<p><i>All of the above, plus</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">★ On-platform experiments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Ability to generalize● Isolation of cause/effect● Ethical considerations



With platform data

With on-platform experiments

AVAILABLE STUDY TYPES

MAJOR LIMITATIONS

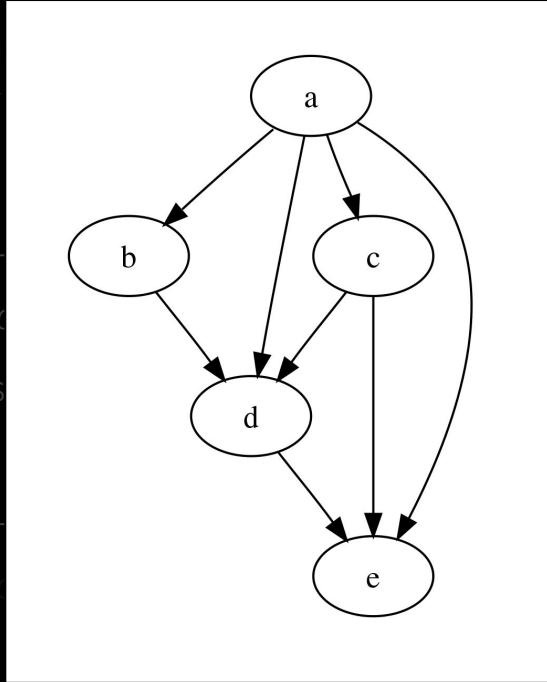
- ★ Sim
- ★ Off-

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- ★ Obs

All of the d

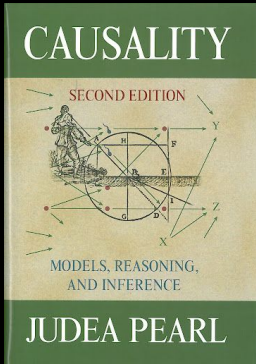
- ★ On-



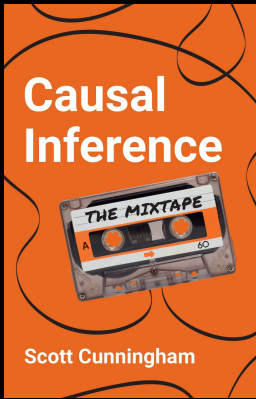
ecological validity

ata scope & quality
ausal inference

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With platform data



AVAILABLE STUDY TYPES

- ★ Sim
- ★ Off-

All of the d

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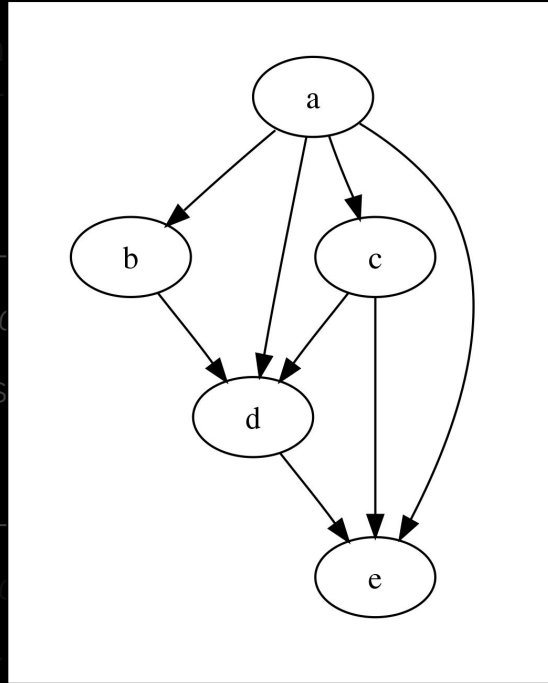
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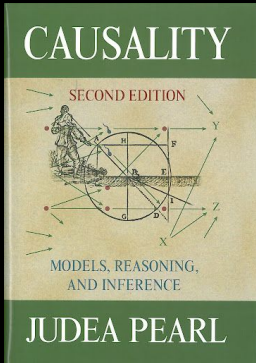
MAJOR LIMITATIONS

ecological validity

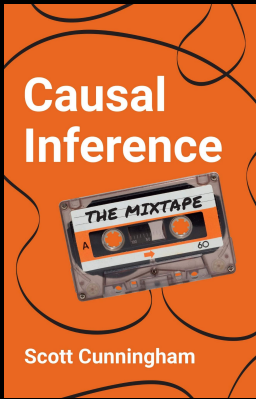
ata scope & quality
ausal inference

bility to generalize
solation of cause/effect
ethical considerations





With platform data



AVAILABLE STUDY TYPES
TYPE OF STUDY

Interventional

Non-interventional

Natural experiments...

All of the above, plus

★ Observational studies

If all confounders are known and measurable...

All of the above, plus

★ On-platform experiments

If some confounders are unknown or unmeasurable...

MAJOR LIMITATIONS
AVAILABLE METHODS

experiments

- Ecological validity

differences-in-differences

regression discontinuity

- instrumental variable
- data source & quality

- Causal inference

subclassification

matching

propensity scoring

- Ability to generalize
- Isolation of cause/effect
- External generalizations
- synthetic control

AVAILABLE STUDY TYPES**MAJOR LIMITATIONS****Without access**

- ★ Simulations
- ★ Off-platform experiments

- Ecological validity

With platform data

- All of the above, plus*
- ★ Observational studies

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- Ability to generalize
- Isolation of cause/effect
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Engagement, User Satisfaction, and the Amplification of Divisive Content on Social Media

Smitha Milli^{a,*}, Micah Carroll^b, Yike Wang^b,
Sashrika Pandey^b, Sebastian Zhao^b, Anca D. Dragan^b

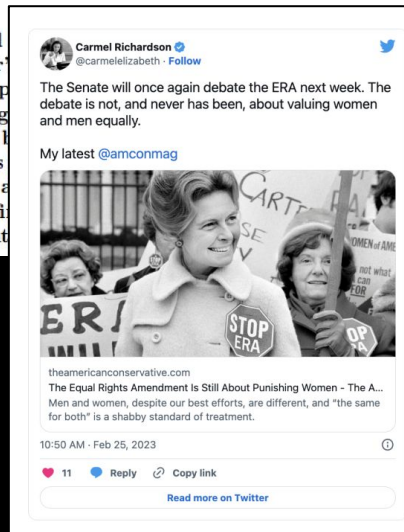
^a *Cornell Tech*

^b *University of California, Berkeley*

* *Corresponding author: smilli@cornell.edu*

In a pre-registered randomized chronological baseline, Twitter users who were exposed to emotionally charged, out-group political tweets selected by a recommendation-based algorithm underperforms users who were exposed to neutral content. We explore the implications of an algorithm that prioritizes users' stated preferences and filters out hostile content but also a potential for amplification of divisive content.

With on-platform experiments



MAJOR LIMITATIONS

- Ecological validity

How does **Carmel Richardson's** tweet make you feel about people or groups on the Left?

Much worse -2 Worse -1 The same as before 0 Better 1 Much better 2



How does **Carmel Richardson's** tweet make you feel about people or groups on the Right?

Much worse -2 Worse -1 The same as before 0 Better 1 Much better 2



Article

Like-minded sources on Facebook are prevalent but not polarizing

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06297-w>

Received: 21 December 2022

Accepted: 7 June 2023

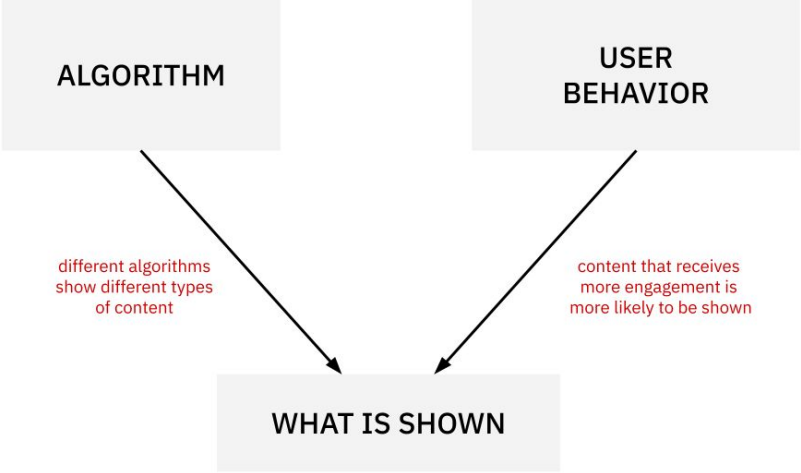
Published online: 27 July 2023

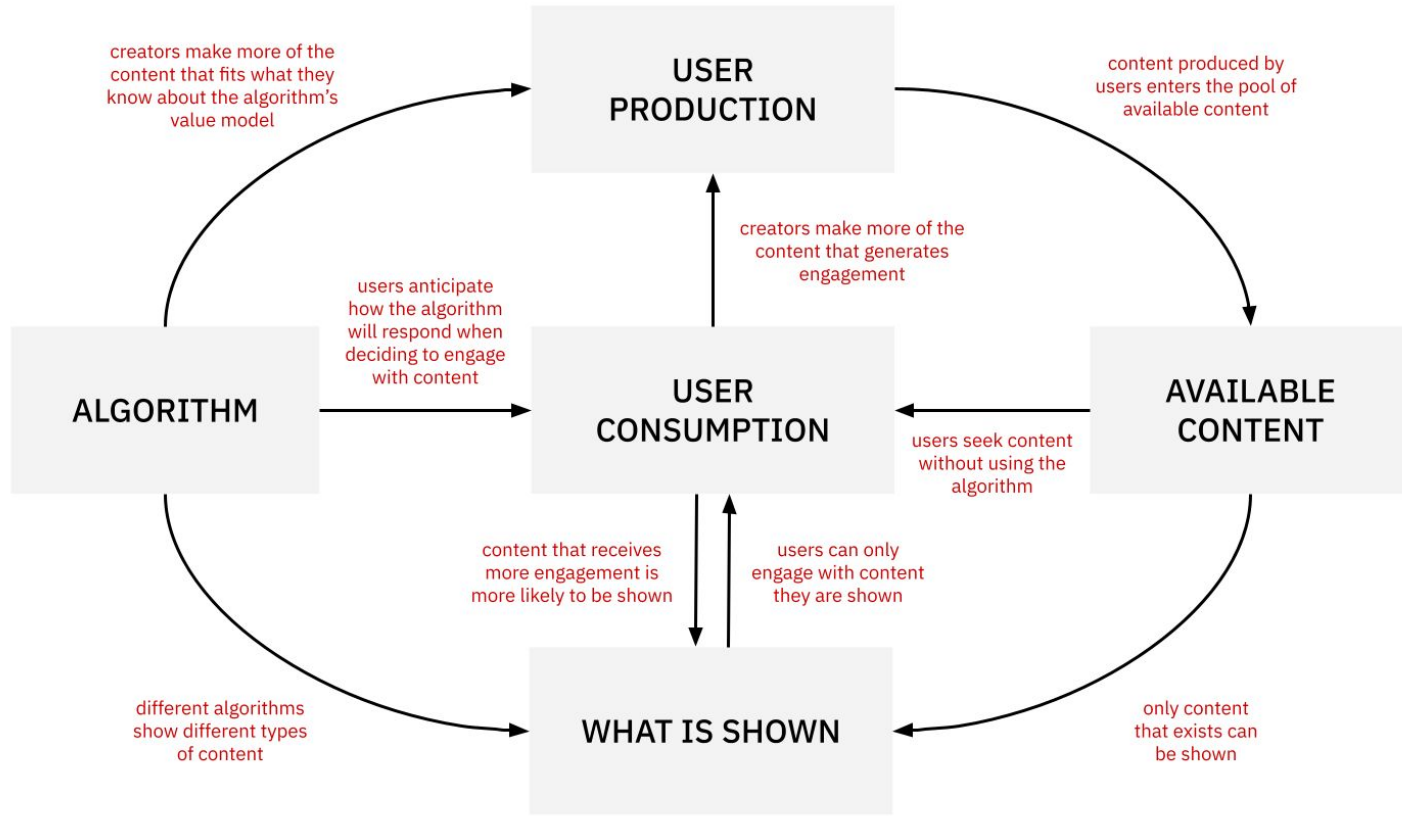
Open access

 Check for updates

Brendan Nyhan^{1,25,6}, Jaime Settle^{2,25}, Emily Thorson^{3,25}, Magdalena Wojcieszak^{4,5,25}, Pablo Barberá^{6,25}, Annie Y. Chen⁷, Hunt Allcott⁸, Taylor Brown⁹, Adriana Crespo-Tenorio⁶, Drew Dimmery^{6,26}, Deen Freelon⁹, Matthew Gentzkow¹⁰, Sandra González-Bailón⁹, Andrew M. Guess^{11,2}, Edward Kennedy¹³, Young Mie Kim¹⁴, David Lazer¹⁵, Neil Malhotra¹⁶, Devra Moehler⁶, Jennifer Pan¹⁷, Daniel Robert Thomas⁶, Rebekah Tromble^{18,19}, Carlos Velasco Rivera⁶, Arjun Wilkins⁶, Beixian Xiong⁶, Chad Kiewiet de Jonge^{6,26}, Annie Franco^{6,26}, Winter Mason^{6,26}, Natalie Jomini Stroud^{20,21,26} & Joshua A. Tucker^{22,23,26}

Many critics raise concerns about the prevalence of ‘echo chambers’ on social media and their potential role in increasing political polarization. However, the lack of available data and the challenges of conducting large-scale field experiments have made it difficult to assess the scope of the problem^{1,2}. Here we present data from 2020 for the entire population of active adult Facebook users in the USA showing that content from ‘like-minded’ sources constitutes the majority of what people see on the platform, although political information and news represent only a small fraction of these exposures. To evaluate a potential response to concerns about the effects of echo chambers, we conducted a multi-wave field experiment on Facebook among 23,377 users for whom we reduced exposure to content from like-minded sources during the 2020 US presidential election by about one-third. We found that the intervention increased their exposure to content from cross-cutting sources and decreased exposure to uncivil language, but had no measurable effects on eight preregistered attitudinal measures such as affective polarization, ideological extremity, candidate evaluations and belief in false claims. These precisely estimated results suggest that although exposure to content from like-minded sources on social





AVAILABLE STUDY TYPES

MAJOR LIMITATIONS

Without access



- ★ Simulations
- ★ Off-platform experiments

- Ecological validity

WHAT IS ENGAGED WITH

WHAT IS SHOWN

WHAT IS THOUGHT

User engages with some types of content more than others.

System shows more of that content.

User's preferences and beliefs align with what is shown.

With on-platform experiments

All of the above, plus

- ★ On-platform experiments

- Ability to generalize
- Isolation of cause/effect
- Ethical considerations

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Reinforcing Spirals: The Mutual Influence of Media Selectivity and Media Effects and Their Impact on Individual Behavior and Social Identity

Michael D. Slater

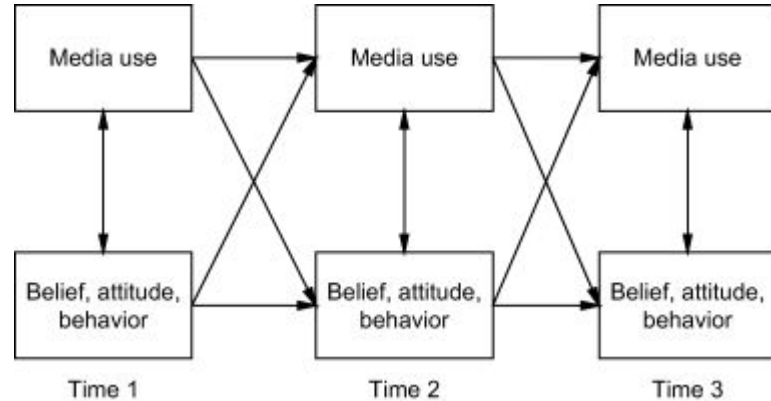
School of Communication, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210

The attitudinal or behavioral outcomes of media use can be expected to influence attention to media content. This process can be conceptually understood as mutually reinforcing spirals akin to positive feedback loops in general systems theory. This reinforcing spirals perspective highlights the need for longitudinal studies of mutually influencing media selection and effects processes; study of psychological factors that control, dampen, or eventually extinguish the spirals. This perspective may also, more speculatively, be extended to theories of social identity for political, religious, and lifestyle groups; a reinforcing spirals model to theories including spiral of silence, aging, cultivation, selective attention, and uses and gratifications is also

doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00296.x

MAJOR LIMITATIONS

- Ecological validity



Downloaded from hit

AVAILABLE STUDY TYPES

MAJOR LIMITATIONS

Without access

- ★ Simulations
- ★ Off-platform experiments

- Ecological validity

With platform data

Often the overall (average) effects are negligible, but:

- **subgroup effects**
- **cumulative effects**

- All of the above, plus*
- ★ Observational studies

- Data scope & quality
- Causal inference

With on-platform experiments

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- Ecological validity

external validity.

In contrast, RCTs or natural experiments make no claim to global knowledge. But simply taking the results of one of these intensively internally validated studies and assuming that they will hold in a “similar” context---perhaps one with blunt covariate adjustments---is an absurd allocation of rigor. **It's like designing and executing a moon landing and then sending the same ship to Mars with triple the fuel and assuming things will work out.**

So: the biggest problem in quantitative methodology is about external validity / generalizability / transportability: how does the knowledge generated in one context

kevinmunger.substack.com/p/all-of-the-above-plus

With on-platform experiments

- ★ On-platform experiments

- Ability to generalize
- Isolation of cause/effect
- Ethical considerations

AVAILABLE STUDY TYPES

MAJOR LIMITATIONS

Quantitative description is cheap, and much of the cost is fixed. In contrast, causal knowledge is expensive and much of the cost is marginal. The marginal cost of updating [a political] database and the [some modeled] scores for each session of Congress is much lower than the fixed cost of creating those models in the first place. In contrast, the marginal cost of re-running a Twitter RCT every time Twitter's userbase or platform policies change is very high.

— Kevin Munger, [In Favor of Quantitative Description](#) (2020)

Objecting to experiments that compare two unobjectionable policies or treatments

Michelle N. Meyer , Patrick R. Heck , Geoffrey S. Holtzman  ⁺³, and Christopher F. Chabris [Authors Info & Affiliations](#)

Edited by Dalton Conley, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, and approved April 8, 2019 (received for review December 5, 2018)

May 9, 2019 | 116 (22) 10723-10728 | <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1820701116>

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 66,387 | 34



Significance

Randomized experiments—long the gold standard in medicine—are increasingly used throughout the social sciences and professions to evaluate business products and services, government programs, education and health policies, and global aid. We find robust evidence—across 16 studies of 5,873 participants from three populations spanning nine domains—that people often approve of untested policies or treatments (A or B) being universally implemented but disapprove of randomized experiments (A/B



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Methods

How platforms do it

Regulation

Methods

How platforms do it

Regulation

Measurement

Facebook is testing its 'less political' News Feed in 75 new countries

The company introduced the changes in the US in August.



Karissa Bell
Senior Editor

Thu, Oct 14, 2021 · 1 min read



Managing Trade-Offs

Ranking by Engagement

AUTHOR
Tom Cunningham, Integrity Institute

PUBLISHED
May 8, 2023

Six observations on ranking by engagement on social media platforms:

1. **Platforms rank content primarily by the predicted probability of engagement.** Platforms choose for each user the items they are predicted to click on, or reply to, or to retweet, etc.¹

2. **Platforms rank by engagement because it increases user retention.** In experiments which compare

engagement-ranked feeds to unranked feeds, engagement-ranked feeds consistently show substantially higher user retention. This is not engagement not in itself but as a means to increase user retention would choose retention.

3. **Engagement is negatively related to content quality.** Content with low scores by various measures of quality (e.g., misinformation, intuitively this is because less appealing content is often the most engaging). As a consequence platforms often supply more content of lower quality.

4. **Sensitive content is often both engaging and of high quality.** The prevalence of various types of "sensitive" content (e.g., politics, etc.). However unlike low-quality content, sensitive content often has high user retention, implying that sensitivity is positively related to engagement.

5. **Sensitive content is often preferred by users.** Users often prefer sensitive content directly for their preferences over content of lower quality.

Thanks to comments from Jeff Allen, Jacquelyn Zehner, David Evan Harris, Jonathan Stray, and others. If you find this note useful for your work send me an email and tell me :).

	retentiveness	engagement	quality	sensitivity	preference
retentiveness		+	+	0	+
engagement			-	+	+
quality				0	0
sensitivity					+
preference					

Managing Trade-Offs

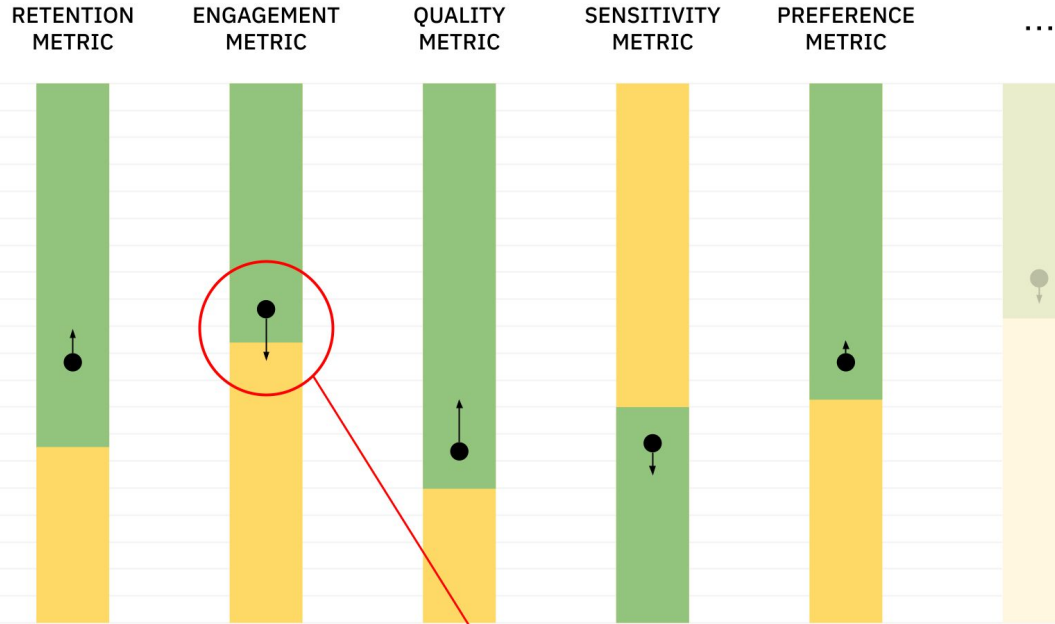
“If a candidate has a significant impact on an important Feed-level metric ... then we present that candidate for review at the main Feed experiment review meeting

If a candidate has a significant impact to an IFR guardrail ... then that can be a blocker, depending on our backtest and the benefits of the launch.

If a candidate significantly impacts an XFN metric ... then we discuss the impact and cost/benefit with the appropriate XFN partner..”

— **Facebook**, Evaluating News Feed Ranking Experiments

Managing Trade-Offs



If a proposed change causes a metric to **leave a specified interval**, the change is not deployed until the person proposing the change has negotiated with the person responsible for the metric.

Methods

How platforms do it

Regulation

Methods

How platforms do it

Regulation

E.U. Digital Services Act

Official Journal of the European Union

L 277



English edition

Legislation

Volume 65
27 October 2022

Contents

I Legislative acts

REGULATIONS

- Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) (*) 1

II Non-legislative acts

INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

- Council Decision (EU) 2022/2066 of 21 February 2022 on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Implementing Protocol to the Fisheries Partnership Agreement between the Gabonese Republic and the European Community (2021-2026) 103

REGULATIONS

- Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/2067 of 25 October 2022 amending Annex 1 to Implementing Regulation (EU) 2021/605 laying down special control measures for African swine fever (*) 106
- Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/2068 of 26 October 2022 imposing a definitive anti-dumping duty on imports of certain cold-rolled flat steel products originating in the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation following an expiry review pursuant to Article 11 (2) of Regulation (EU) 2016/1036 of the European Parliament and of the Council 149

(*) Text with EEA relevance.

EN

Acts whose titles are printed in light type are those relating to day-to-day management of agricultural matters, and are generally valid for a limited period.

The titles of all other acts are printed in bold type and preceded by an asterisk.

● Article 40

*“Upon a reasoned request from the Digital Services Coordinator of establishment, **providers of very large online platforms** or of very large online search engines shall, within a reasonable period, as specified in the request, **provide access to data to vetted researchers** who meet the requirements in paragraph 8 of this Article, **for the sole purpose of conducting research that contributes to the detection, identification and understanding of systemic risks in the Union, as set out ...**”*

U.S. Platform Accountability & Transparency Act

ii

117TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. 5339

To support research about the impact of digital communication platforms on society by providing privacy-protected, secure pathways for independent research on data held by large internet companies.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

DECEMBER 21, 2022

Mr. COONS (for himself, Mr. PORTMAN, Ms. KLOBUCHAR, and Mr. CASSIDY) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

A BILL

To support research about the impact of digital communication platforms on society by providing privacy-protected, secure pathways for independent research on data held by large internet companies.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE; TABLE OF CONTENTS.**

4 (a) SHORT TITLE.—This Act may be cited as the
5 “Platform Accountability and Transparency Act”.

6 (b) TABLE OF CONTENTS.—The table of contents for
7 this Act is as follows:

Sec. 1. Short title; table of contents.

- **Data access.**

Independent researchers submit proposals to the National Science Foundation. If approved, platforms required to provide the necessary data, subject to privacy + cybersecurity protections.

- **Safe harbor for automated data collection.**

Prevents social media companies from suing or criminally accusing public interest researchers who scrape public-facing platform data, so long as the researcher uses appropriate privacy safeguards.

Proposals relating to product experiments

Menu LAWFARE Q

Cybersecurity & Tech

How Tech Regulation Can Leverage Product Experimentation Results

Nathaniel Lubin, Ravi Iyer

Tuesday, July 11, 2023, 8:00 AM

Share On: [f](#) [t](#) [in](#)

Mandated visibility into product experimentation would allow regulators to audit platform design choices to prevent societal harm.

