

What is BitChute? Characterizing the “Free Speech” Alternative to YouTube

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we characterize the content and discourse on BitChute, a social video-hosting platform. Launched in 2017 as an alternative to YouTube, BitChute joins an ecosystem of alternative, low content moderation platforms, including Gab, Voat, Minds, and 4chan. Uniquely, BitChute is the first of these alternative platforms to focus on video content and is growing in popularity. Our analysis reveals several key characteristics of the platform. We find that only a handful of channels receive any engagement, and almost all of those channels contain conspiracies or hate speech. This high rate of hate speech on the platform as a whole, much of which is anti-Semitic, is particularly concerning. Our results suggest that BitChute has a higher rate of hate speech than Gab but less than 4chan. Lastly, we find that while some BitChute content producers have been banned from other platforms, many maintain profiles on mainstream social media platforms, particularly YouTube. This paper contributes a first look at the content and discourse on BitChute and provides a building block for future research on low content moderation platforms.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Cultural characteristics**; • **Information systems** → **Social networks**.

KEYWORDS

social media, social networks, hate speech, online communities

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1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the online media ecosystem has gained significant attention due to its role in false information spread, radicalizing ideological extremists, and perpetuating malicious hate speech. Due to these rising concerns, several social media platforms, including Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit, have begun efforts to mitigate both false information and hate speech through a variety of methods, including banning users, quarantining communities, and demonetizing content creators. This new approach on platforms that were once more lax in content moderation has led to the proliferation of many alternative social platforms, which harbor banned and demonetized content creators in the name of free speech. The discourse on these alternative platforms has motivated, incited, or has been connected to offline violence [2].

An under-explored platform in this space is BitChute, a social video-hosting platform launched as an alternative to YouTube. BitChute joins an ecosystem of alternative, low content moderation platforms, including Gab, Voat, Minds, and 4chan. Uniquely, BitChute is the first of these alternative platforms to focus on video content and is growing in popularity (fig. 1).

In order to better understand the potential dangers of BitChute, we perform an exploratory, mixed-methods analysis of the video-hosting platform. Our goal with this work is to provide a broad characterization of the platform for future research to build from. To the best of our knowledge, this work is the first characterization of BitChute and its place in the alternative social media ecosystem. Specifically, we address three primary questions:

- Q1. What types of videos and content producers does BitChute attract, and what content receives engagement?
- Q2. What types of discussions happen in BitChute comment threads?
- Q3. What connections to contemporary social media platforms exist on BitChute?

In the rest of this short paper, we summarize our main results to these questions. We provide details and supplemental material for this work here: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2004.01984.pdf>.

2 DATA

To answer our research questions, we construct a BitChute dataset. Specifically, we have collected a corpus of video metadata and comment data, which includes nearly all videos publicly posted to BitChute between June 28th and December 3rd 2019. We have collected data on 441K videos in two passes: first by acquiring data about each video as it is posted, and then by returning to each video

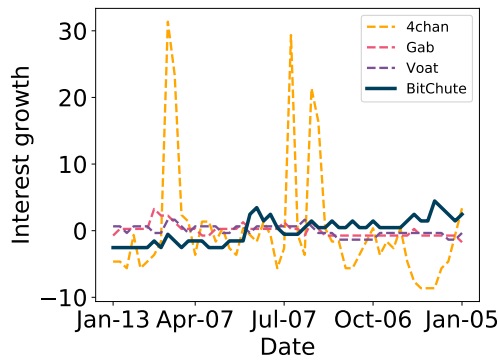


Figure 1: Google Trends interest over time, where the mean is shifted to 0 for comparison. Interest in BitChute has steadily increased, while Gab and Voat have stagnated. Interest in 4chan spikes periodically when mentioned in mainstream media.

one week later to collect views and comments. The dataset is freely available at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/mela>.

3 RESULTS

What types of videos and content producers does BitChute attract, and what content receives engagement? We find that the videos receiving the majority of views and comments are predominantly about conservative news, politics, and conspiracy theories. Specifically, using an LDA topic model, we found many words related to Trump politics, current events, and political conspiracies. We also found specific topics focused on conspiracy theories about mass shooting events in Las Vegas and Kent State. Additionally, we find that episodes of Alex Jones radio show, Infowars, are so heavily present on the platform that the show gets its own topic.

Concerningly, we also find a significant amount of gaming content on the platform, providing a potential radicalization pathway [3]. This content is mixed with misogyny, includes key words like: gameplay, marvel, super mario, smash bros, and minecraft, all video games typically targeted to a younger audience. There are also key words related to the anti-feminist, male supremacist group, ‘Men Going Their Own Way’, including MGTOW and red pill. However, this gaming content receives very little engagement in comparison to videos on news and politics.

When qualitatively examining the top five most viewed videos in our dataset, we find videos that include hateful social commentators, InfoWars, QAnon conspiracy theorists, and homophobic and islamophobic “satire”. Many of the channels, whose videos have received the most views and comments, have been banned from other social media platforms, forcing them to alternative sites like BitChute if they want to continue uploading.

What types of discussions happen in BitChute comment threads? The majority of the comments are loosely related to politics, just as we found when examining video topics. Specifically, we see 27.2% of the tokens from our LDA model are related to

government and policy. We also see comments related to police authority and race relations, which overlap some with the comments on policy. Many of these words relate to a wide variety of alt-right talking points. In addition to these major themes, we see very specific topics in the comments, such as Donald Trump related politics and Adam Schiff related politics. Outside of politics, we also see comments related to Christianity, Movies, and the Holocaust. We also see more generic comments including compliments towards video contents and links to memes.

Using the filtered Hatebase dictionary from [1], we found that 10.03% of comments contained at least 1 hate speech term and the average number of hate terms per hate comment is 1.53. This rate of hate speech is significant. Specifically, in comparison to the numbers reported in [4] and [1], BitChute comments contain 4.44 times the rate of hate terms as in Twitter posts and 1.85 times the rate of hate terms seen in Gab posts, but the rate of hate terms is 1.2 times less than the rate on 4chan’s politically incorrect board, /pol/. When examining both the top phrases that appear in the comments and the most frequent hate terms used, we found high-levels of anti-Semitic comments.

What connections to contemporary social media platforms exist on BitChute? Many of the BitChute content creators that have not been banned from mainstream platforms like YouTube maintain a presence on both sites, providing a potential gateway for viewers to find more extreme content. These channels either mirror their videos across both websites, which BitChute provides tools to facilitate, or post their more extreme content on BitChute and reference it in their YouTube channels.

In conclusion, BitChute appears to be an increasingly popular video-sharing platform, especially for the dissemination of news and political content. As is common among fringe and alternative platforms, much of BitChute’s content is politically extreme and hateful. Our results suggest that BitChute has a higher rate of hate speech than Gab, but less than 4chan’s politically incorrect board /pol/. We find that only a handful of channels receive any engagement, and almost all of those channels contain conspiracies or hate speech. Lastly, we find several potential pathways to BitChute’s extreme content from mainstream platforms, including the presence of BitChute content producers on mainstream social media. Concerningly, BitChute contains a more diverse mix of content than Gab, including much more gaming and entertainment content, increasing the likelihood that an unradicalized individual may be incidentally exposed to more extreme views. This exposure is especially troubling given the large volume of hate speech and calls for violence present on BitChute.

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