



# Spread of Ideas Online

## What kinds of ideas spread?

Benign, ideological, newsworthy, conspiratorial, memetic, propagandistic, tactical, activist, organisational, promotional.<sup>1</sup>

## Who is involved?

**actors:** public figures (politicians, celebrities), credible figures (e.g. scientists), valued figures (friends, family).<sup>2</sup>

**systems:** mainstream and alternative news, social media, messaging apps, hosting platforms.<sup>2</sup>

**system exploiters:** superspreaders, extremist recruiters, trolls.<sup>3</sup>

**social media users**  
yourself



## When do ideas most spread online?

- Offline events/discourse (e.g. #BLM) → increased online hate speech on mainstream and fringe platforms.<sup>4</sup>
- Economic and political instability → increased misinformation present online.<sup>4</sup>



## How do ideas spread online?

### Content positioning and framing

- Make ideas more relatable, appealing, shareable.
- Align ideas with existing values, exploit cognitive biases (group identification, humour, emotion).<sup>2</sup>

### Group identification

- Diffusion of ideas within a group or movement.<sup>1</sup>
- Collective anxiety creates and maintains in-group/out-group tensions, reinforcement of and commitment to ideas.<sup>5</sup>
- Intermediary networks facilitate indirect group interactions and idea laundering between groups.<sup>3</sup>

### Algorithmic amplification

- Social media results in echo chambers where users are repeatedly exposed to similar viewpoints.<sup>6</sup>
- Groups and superspreaders actively manipulate traffic to engage algorithms.<sup>4</sup>



### Legitimation

- Increased prevalence of and exposure to the idea.
- Increased acceptance of the idea.
- Adoption of the idea into mainstream discourse.<sup>7</sup>

### Adaptation to cultural context

Idea is adapted to local social tensions.<sup>4</sup>  
Local actions inspire broader movements at regional, national, or global levels through similarity attribution and emulation of original action.<sup>1</sup>



1: Soule, S. A. (2013). Diffusion and Scale Shift. In D. A. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans, & D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2: Rothut, S., Schulze, H., Rieger, D., & Naderer, B. (2024). Mainstreaming as a meta-process: A systematic review and conceptual model of factors contributing to the mainstreaming of radical and extremist positions. *Communication Theory*, 34, 39-59. 3: Kilinger, U., Bennett, W. L., Knäuper, C. B., Martini, F., & Zhang, X. (2023). From the fringes into mainstream politics: intermediary networks and movement-party coordination of a global anti-immigration campaign in Germany. *Information, Communication & Society*, 9(26), 1890-1907. 4: Lupu, Y., Sear, R., Velásquez, N., Leahy, R., Restrepo, N. J., Goldberg, B., & Johnson, N. F. (2023). Offline events and online hate. *PloS One*, 18(1), e0278511. 5: Collins, J. (2023). Mobilising extremism in times of change: Analysing the UK's far-right online content during the pandemic. *European Journal of Criminal Policy and Research*, 29(3), 355-377. 6: Mikhaeil, C.A. & Baskerville, R.L. (2019). Explaining online conspiracy theory radicalization: A second-order affordance for identity-driven escalation. *Information Systems Journal*, 34, 711-735. 7: Solea, A. I. & Sugjura, L. (2023). Mainstreaming the Blackpill: Understanding the Incel Community on TikTok. *European Journal of Criminal Policy & Research*, 29, 311-336.