



Article

# Deplatforming Donald Trump influences platform migration between Twitter and alternative sites

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## Abstract

Social media platforms have removed influential users for violating platform rules. While this intervention reduces harmful content on the platform, deplatforming high-profile figures may prompt general users to migrate to alternative domains, where they can continue to engage with inappropriate communication. Utilizing web tracking data from 12,400 US Twitter users, we showed that after Twitter deplatformed Donald Trump, users had no immediate change in Twitter usage, but their engagement with the platform decreased slightly over time. Meanwhile, they demonstrated an increase in visiting alternative domains, although this spike gradually tapered off. This pattern varied across the population: Those frequently consuming left-leaning news immediately increased Twitter usage, whereas users visiting right-leaning outlets displayed a rise in using alternative social media, especially among heavy consumers of right-leaning news. These findings highlight the importance of investigating two separate processes of platform migration, non-use and new use, for appraising the impact of content moderation.

## Keywords

Alternative domains, content moderation, deplatforming, ideological asymmetry, information ecosystem, platform migration

Social media platforms have employed various content moderation measures to regulate inappropriate communication (Carlson and Rousselle, 2020; Gillespie, 2018; Grimmelmann, 2015; Kozyreva et al., 2023). One common strategy is deplatforming, or “the removal of

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one's account on social media for breaking platform rules" (Rogers, 2020: 1). This moderation tactic has garnered considerable attention in the past few years, particularly when the US President Donald Trump was banned from major social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, for inciting violence during the attack on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 (Meta, 2021; X, 2021).

As deplatforming becomes an increasingly prominent exercise, a growing body of literature has evaluated its impact, finding that this tactic effectively curtailed the circulation of malicious content on the enacting platform (e.g. Jhaver et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2024). However, user behaviors within today's information ecosystem often span multiple platforms and other sites. Studies have shown that users and communities experiencing suspension could resurface in alternative online spaces (e.g. Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021; Rauchfleisch and Kaiser, 2024; Rogers, 2020). Yet, the effectiveness of deplatforming in curbing inappropriate communication cannot be fully understood without examining the behavior of general users—those unaffected by the direct moderation. Following the deplatforming of a high-profile figure, we argue that general users can change their information use accordingly and navigate to alternative domains—a group of social media platforms and information websites that are created or utilized as alternatives to mainstream platforms and news media. This move may lead to the radicalization of users, as these alternative domains often provide spaces for extreme communities to recirculate their discourses (Baele et al., 2023; Dehghan and Nagappa, 2022; Ophir et al., 2023; Robinson, 2022).

This study adopts an information ecosystem perspective, which considers various interrelated digital sites, to understand people's shifting usage of multiple domains in response to content moderation practices by a single platform. Specifically, we investigate platform migration, or users' movement from one platform to other sites (Edwards and Boellstorff, 2021). While migration is often conceptualized as a unitary process, indicating exclusive relationships of belonging between individuals and sites, we argue that in digital spaces, this concept comprises two analytically distinct but potentially interrelated components: non-use, which refers to voluntarily reducing the usage of a previously utilized platform (Edwards and Boellstorff, 2021), and new use, defined as the intentional increase in the usage of a domain, particularly those seldom or never used in the past. By distinguishing between these two processes, our analysis provides a more granular understanding of the multifaceted consequences of content moderation—how deplatforming affects the enacting platform (non-use), and how it ripples through the broader information ecosystem (new use), where users may continue to engage with inappropriate communication that the exercise once endeavored to moderate.

Different users exhibit distinct information behaviors in digital environments (e.g. Bail, 2021; Grinberg et al., 2019). We thus further characterize heterogeneous reaction patterns among various groups. Particularly, this study investigates ideological asymmetries that the political left and right in the United States display different patterns of online media use (Freelon et al., 2020; González-Bailón et al., 2023). Such asymmetries also manifest in the context of content moderation (e.g. Appel et al., 2023; Mosleh et al., 2022; Shaughnessy et al., 2024), suggesting that left- and right-leaning individuals may respond differently to a high-profile deplatforming event. We specifically examine users visiting news sources with various ideological slants, as deplatforming a high-profile

political actor carries diverse implications for the circulation of information with different ideological positions on the platform. In addition, within each ideological group, we look at various levels of political involvement measured by the amount of news consumption (Krupnikov and Ryan, 2022). Individuals who consume news from ideologically similar outlets, but with very different amounts, may respond differently as the deplatforming exercise affects their information diets to varying degrees.

Focusing on Twitter's action to deplatform Donald Trump on 8 January 2021, we analyzed large-scale web browsing records from a sample of US Twitter users ( $N=12,400$ ). Our findings show that, on average, users experienced no immediate change in Twitter usage following this event, but their engagement with the platform decreased slightly over time. In addition, they demonstrated a significant increase in visiting alternative domains, although this spike gradually tapered off. Crucially, this shift toward alternative domains did not come at the expense of Twitter non-use, suggesting that the two processes involved in platform migration—non-use and new use—are separate dynamics. Our analysis also revealed heterogeneous patterns across user groups. Individuals who frequently visited left-leaning news sources immediately increased their Twitter usage, whereas those engaged with right-leaning outlets displayed a significant rise in using alternative social media platforms (e.g. Gab, BitChute), especially among heavy consumers of right-leaning news. These findings offer actionable insights into content moderation practices and platform governance.

## **Beyond platform borders: consequences of social media deplatforming**

Social media platforms have employed various content moderation strategies to address harmful content, such as misinformation, hate speech, and conspiracy theories (Carlson and Rousselle, 2020; Cinelli et al., 2022; Kozyreva et al., 2023). These measures range from flagging content with warning labels (Crawford and Gillespie, 2016) and reducing algorithmic visibility (Gillespie, 2022) to suspending problematic accounts temporarily. Among these, deplatforming, or the removal of one's account, represents the most dramatic response to severe policy violations (Rogers, 2020). The first large-scale deplatforming effort targeted Daesh in 2017, when platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube endeavored to curb online terrorism (Conway et al., 2019). These platforms also extended this approach to far-right influencers, including Alex Jones, Louis Farrakhan, and Milo Yiannopoulos, drawing considerable public attention in recent years (Isaac and Roose, 2019; Kraus, 2018).

With deplatforming on the rise, research has examined the impact of this moderation tactic, suggesting that deplatforming could benefit the enacting platforms by eliminating inappropriate content and behaviors. For example, Jhaver et al. (2021) investigated Twitter's deplatforming of three influencers who promoted offensive speech. This intervention on Twitter markedly attenuated the prevalence of offensive ideas and conspiracy theories, as well as the overall posting activity and toxicity of their supporters (Jhaver et al., 2021). Likewise, McCabe et al. (2024) found that Twitter's action to deplatform misinformation spreaders after the US Capitol attack reduced the circulation of misinformation on this platform by these users and their followers.

These studies, while assessing the effects within a single platform, have overlooked potential impacts beyond that specific site. Today's information environment functions like an ecosystem comprising multiple platforms and various sites; intervening on one may cause unintended consequences that spill over to the rest of the ecosystem. One significant outcome is the activation of cross-platform behaviors, which displaces—rather than eliminates—harmful activities. For example, research has shown that users and communities experiencing suspension could resurface in alternative online spaces (Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021; Klinenberg, 2023; Mekacher et al., 2023; Rastogi et al., 2025; Rauchfleisch and Kaiser, 2024; Rogers, 2020; Russo et al., 2023). Some suspended online extremists even exhibited increased levels of activity and toxicity on alternative platforms (Ali et al., 2021).

While existing studies have focused primarily on users and communities directly affected by moderation actions, how general users—those not subject to direct interventions—react to the removal of prominent accounts remains underexplored. We argue that deplatforming a high-profile figure can trigger broader behavioral shifts among general users, who may change their information behaviors and migrate to alternative domains. Buntain et al. (2023), for example, observed a significant sharing surge in links to Gab on Twitter and Reddit after the January 6 Capitol attack moderation efforts. Nevertheless, we still know little about the specific ways in which general users may shift their information behaviors in response to such events.

## The information ecosystem: mainstreams and alternatives

To understand the impact of deplatforming a high-profile figure on cross-platform behaviors of general users, it is imperative to examine content moderation at the level of the information ecosystem. This perspective considers abundant digital sites with different characteristics that interact with each other in various manners. Particularly, this study focuses on two groups within the information ecosystem: mainstream and alternative domains. Here, we use “domains” as an umbrella term that encompasses both social media platforms and information websites, and the conceptualization of “mainstream” and “alternative” should be understood in a relational way (Holt et al., 2019).

Specifically, mainstream domains refer to Big Tech social media platforms and legacy news media websites, while alternative domains denote a collection of social media platforms (e.g. Gab, BitChute, Rumble) and information websites (e.g. *Breitbart*, *The Epoch Times*) that are created or utilized as alternatives to the mainstream (Holt et al., 2019; Rogers, 2020; Van Dijck et al., 2021). This relation should be contextualized within a sociopolitical background that has witnessed the rise of contemporary “alt” politics in the United States during the 2010s. Since then, alternative movements and ideologies, featuring vulgarity, incivility, and a highly adversarial approach to political opposition, have arisen as challenges to mainstream norms of political conduct (Moffitt, 2024). The peak of alt politics in the mid-to-late 2010s has given birth to several alternative domains that explicitly position themselves as alternatives to the mainstream (e.g. Gab, BitChute; Horne et al., 2025; Jasser et al., 2023). Other domains, such as 4chan, Discord, and Signal, were not originally created for the alt movement but later adopted and utilized by its adherents (Baele et al., 2023; Robinson, 2022). These differences (social media/

information websites, alt-born/non-alt-born) reflect the complex and dynamic nature of today's alternative information ecosystem.

Both mainstream and alternative domains compete for user attention, a limited but essential resource in the age of the attention economy. A critical factor that shapes the competition is media content, which plays a central role in attracting attention and consumption by gratifying specific audience needs (Dimmick, 2003). In today's information ecosystem, alternative domains often adopt lax content moderation policies compared to mainstream counterparts. They claim to support "free speech" and "anti-censorship," thus attracting inappropriate and even extreme content that can hardly thrive in mainstream domains (Baele et al., 2023; Jasser et al., 2023; Ophir et al., 2023; Robinson, 2022). However, empirical evidence shows that mainstream domains also allow some circulation of radical content (Baele et al., 2023; Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Meanwhile, with their larger user base (Pew Research Center, 2022), mainstream domains foster a broader range of content, making them more competent in attracting and retaining users with diverse interests.

We argue that many content moderation strategies, such as deplatforming, may change the competitive relationship between mainstream and alternative domains. By enacting moderation policies, mainstream domains restrict certain types of content or remove specific actors, which brings forth a strong influence on the information landscape within these sites (e.g. Jhaver et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2024). However, the restricted content and actors can still be available in alternative domains (e.g. Horne et al., 2025), which fill the demand gap and thus attract users with related interests. This is especially the case for Twitter, where the extreme right constitutes a large proportion of the user base (Freelon, 2019). Deplatforming a specific right-wing political actor (here, Donald Trump) on Twitter should restructure the competitive dynamics between this platform and alternative domains, leading to a direct outcome: platform migration.

## **Platform migration in response to content moderation**

Platform migration refers to user shifts from one platform to other platforms (Edwards and Boellstorff, 2021). In this study, we broaden the scope to consider domains as potential destinations. Migration is often conceptualized as a unitary process, implying exclusive relationships of belonging between individuals and sites, as a person in the physical world can never appear in two places at once. However, digital environments do not impose this physical constraint but enable simultaneous engagement across domains, which urges us to look at two underlying processes, non-use and new use, as we discussed above.

Distinguishing between these two processes is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, non-use and new use are not fully dependent on each other: Users may reduce their usage of a platform without seeking alternatives, or conversely, may diversify their platform use without completely disengaging from the original site. Some studies have documented this non-exclusive pattern. For example, users maintain accounts across multiple platforms while temporarily reallocating their attention among them (Jeong et al., 2024; Kumar et al., 2011). Fiesler and Dym (2020) found that in online fandom communities, platform migration often involves a period of parallel use of both old and new platforms.

Practically, non-use and new use highlight different outcomes when assessing content moderation within the information ecosystem. Content moderation reflects a platform's efforts to align with evolving public speech norms, which is critical to the legitimacy of a mainstream platform (De Keulenaar et al., 2023). These normative endeavors may also shape the enacting platform's user base and its corresponding economic outcomes, which should be examined through the lens of non-use. New use, however, signals how moderation practices potentially foster engagement with moderated content and actors elsewhere. By distinguishing between non-use and new use, our approach allows for a more granular understanding of the multifaceted consequences of content moderation—both for the enacting platform and for the collective interest of the wider information ecosystem, which aligns with the rising calls for ecosystem-level platform governance (e.g. Van Dijck et al., 2021).

Given this conceptual distinction, this study examines how content moderation—specifically, the deplatforming of a high-profile figure—affects both general users' disengagement from the enacting platform (non-use) and their engagement with alternative domains (new use). Mainstream platforms employ content moderation strategies to reduce the circulation of specific content. This may limit their ability to retain users with interests in that particular type of content, resulting in platform non-use. There is a lack of direct evidence on whether deplatforming specific actors, especially high-profile individuals, can trigger platform non-use among general users. Nevertheless, recent research provides some indirect support: For example, the adult content ban by Tumblr in 2018 resulted in reduced traffic and user loss in the face of this moderation action (Edwards and Boellstorff, 2021; also see Chandrasekharan et al., 2017). Since platform non-use includes not only a moment of abandonment but also a process of leaving or limiting usage (Brubaker et al., 2016), we examine two effects: immediate and gradual changes. The following hypotheses are proposed accordingly:

*H1.* The deplatforming of Trump on Twitter leads to (a) an immediate decrease and (b) a negative alteration to the temporal trend in Twitter usage among its users.

Meanwhile, alternative domains may become more attractive to users who seek restricted content to gratify their information needs, thus experiencing a rise in new use. Research has found that banning an entire online community (e.g. subreddits) causes its members to leave for other platforms and websites (Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021; Russo et al., 2023). Moreover, previous studies have shown that content creators, particularly online influencers, increasingly use alternative platforms after being banned from mainstream social media (Ali et al., 2021; Klinenberg, 2023; Rauchfleisch and Kaiser, 2024; Rogers, 2020). These individuals also encourage their followers to move with them (Buntain et al., 2023). If users seek to maintain their engagement with deplatformed actors and restricted content, they may actively increase their usage of alternative domains that feature different content moderation policies. Therefore, similar to H1, we propose two hypotheses:

*H2.* The deplatforming of Trump on Twitter leads to (a) an immediate increase and (b) a positive alteration to the temporal trend in the usage of alternative domains among Twitter users.

As we discussed earlier, the concept of platform migration—if rooted in the assumption of physical contingency—may not adequately capture the dynamics of digital mobility. When encountering content moderation, users may engage with alternative domains without abandoning their incumbent ones. For example, Shaughnessy et al. (2024) found that right-wing alternative social media users did not completely abandon mainstream social media sites. Nevertheless, the relationship between platform non-use and new use remains empirically underexplored. Specifically, it is unclear whether new use of a domain necessarily corresponds with decreased engagement on the original one. Hence, we ask:

*RQ1.* Do new users of alternative domains reduce their Twitter usage?

## Heterogeneities of cross-platform dynamics

Ample evidence has underscored diverse information behaviors across user groups (e.g. Bail, 2021; Grinberg et al., 2019), which should also apply to platform migration. We argue that the heterogeneity could stem from ideological asymmetries that the political left and right display different patterns in online media use (Freelon et al., 2020; González-Bailón et al., 2023). Such asymmetries also manifest in the context of content moderation. First, the moderation targets are distributed unevenly across the ideological spectrum. Empirical work has shown that right-leaning users are more likely to be suspended on mainstream platforms like Twitter, given their associations with low-quality news sharing (Mosleh et al., 2022). Shaughnessy et al. (2024) found that users who had experienced deplatforming in the United States were largely conservative (also see Mekacher et al., 2023). The moderation practices targeting, in particular, far-right groups have also gained much attention in public discourse (Isaac and Roose, 2019; Kraus, 2018). In this context, far-right communities have adopted a victimized identity and cultivated an ideological narrative that frames content moderation as censorship (Baele et al., 2023; Jasser et al., 2023; Robinson, 2022).

Second, recent research suggests that attitudes toward content moderation diverge along partisan lines. In the United States, Democrats are more likely to support harmful content removal and account penalization; in contrast, Republicans tend to oppose these interventions (Appel et al., 2023; Kozyreva et al., 2023). As a result, reactions to high-profile deplatforming events may vary along ideological lines, given the larger resistance among conservative users than others.

Third, the partisan divide also extends to perceptions of the moderation decision-makers and operators—Big Tech entities such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter. There is widespread skepticism among right-leaning individuals that these companies favor liberal ideologies and have biases against conservative viewpoints (Hasson, 2020; Romm, 2019). Hence, right-leaning individuals may engage differently with content moderation practices implemented by Big Tech platforms, compared to their left-leaning counterparts.

There are various strategies to characterize the left and the right. In this study, we specifically examine user groups consuming news from sources with different ideological slants. Their news consumption patterns should indicate different types of content they seek on the platforms, which suggests another mechanism accounting for the asymmetrical responses: A deplatforming exercise, such as the suspension of @realDonaldTrump on Twitter, directly affects the information circulation of the right, which is critical to the information needs of this group. This may create a demand gap and, in turn, prompt platform migration among its members. Taken together, we believe that individuals consuming news from left- or right-leaning sources may respond distinctively to deplatforming exercises enacted by major social media platforms. Given the limited direct evidence, we ask:

*RQ2.* How do Twitter users, who consume news from ideologically differentiated outlets, differ in their changes in the usage of (a) Twitter and (b) alternative domains following Trump's deplatforming on Twitter?

Within the scope of ideological asymmetries, we further examine the variations in people's political involvement, defined as one's investment of the self in politics (Federico and Hunt, 2013). Because political involvement inherently requires individuals to stay informed about political information, typically through news media, people's news consumption serves as an important indicator of their involvement level (Krupnikov and Ryan, 2022).

Deplatforming a high-profile political actor may have diverse implications for individuals with various levels of involvement. Deplatforming could reshape the information environment on the enacting platform (e.g. McCabe et al., 2024), which in turn affects the information diets of platform users, especially those who heavily consumed the moderated content. In our case, deplatforming a right-wing political actor should reduce the opportunities of circulating right-leaning information on the platform. For instance, following the suspension of prominent far-right accounts on Twitter, the number of posts about these figures declined markedly on the platform (Jhaver et al., 2021). As users with high political involvement often engage with a large amount of political content on social media (Krupnikov and Ryan, 2022), this disruption may create stronger incentives for them to seek alternative information sources. Taken together, we believe that frequent consumers of right-leaning news are more likely to migrate than others following the deplatforming of a right-wing political actor. Still, given the lack of direct evidence, we ask:

*RQ3.* How do Twitter users, who consume news from ideologically differentiated outlets at varying levels, differ in their changes in the usage of (a) Twitter and (b) alternative domains following Trump's deplatforming on Twitter?

## Methods

### Data

This study leveraged the ComScore Web Behavior Database, which encompasses a sample of US Internet users and their minute-by-minute online browsing records on desktops. The unit in the database is an online session, or a series of consecutive webpage visits to

a web domain. The domain of the visit, the number of pages viewed, the exact time the session was initiated, and the duration of the session were documented.

We specifically examined the period from 1 January 2021 to 18 February 2021 (7 weeks in total). This relatively short observation window was chosen to minimize the risk of contamination from unrelated events or trends that were more likely to emerge over a longer timeframe. As the public attention surge during the Capitol attack may lead to abnormal platform usage patterns (e.g. intensified platform use for information seeking), we excluded data from 6 to 7 January 2021 to prevent our causal identification from this anomalous event and used the date of Trump's deplatforming on 8 January 2021 as the intervention point.

Given that some panelists joined and left the ComScore panel over time, we focused on those who contributed at least one record in both the first and last week of the timespan to ensure that they were active in the panel during the time window. Moreover, only those who visited Twitter at least once in the time window were analyzed further. Overall, we identified 12,400 Twitter users from more than 80,000 panelists.<sup>1</sup> They generated over 13 million session records.

## Measures

*Twitter use* was measured by calculating the daily number of pages each panelist viewed on Twitter. This highly skewed variable was log-transformed before further analyses ( $M=0.11$ ,  $SD=0.39$ ). We also used duration as an alternative measure of Twitter use in Supplementary Information (SI; see S3), yielding qualitatively similar results.

*Alternative domain use* was measured as the daily number of pages each panelist viewed on alternative domains, a list we compiled from previous literature that included 17 social media platforms, such as Gab, BitChut, and Telegram, as well as 11 information websites, such as *Breitbart* and *The Epoch Times* (see Table S2 in SI for the full list and studies using them). Pageviews on these 28 domains were aggregated together and log-transformed, given the high skewness ( $M=0.20$ ,  $SD=0.56$ ). Again, we employed duration as an alternative measure in SI (S3), and the results remained similar.

*News consumption* was measured as the number of pages each panelist viewed on news domains during the pre-intervention period (1–5 January 2021). We compiled a list of news websites from previous studies (Bakshy et al., 2015; Budak et al., 2016; Grinberg et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2020) and determined their ideological slants according to media bias ratings from Ad Fontes Media (<https://adfontesmedia.com>). The final list included 550 news domains, each assigned a bias score (denoted by  $x$  below) ranging from  $-38.5$  (most extreme left) to  $38.5$  (most extreme right). Following Huszár et al. (2022), we grouped these domains into five categories: Left ( $x \leq -16.5$ ,  $n=23$ ), Skews Left ( $-16.5 < x \leq -5.5$ ,  $n=96$ ), Neutral ( $-5.5 < x < 5.5$ ,  $n=351$ ), Skews Right ( $5.5 \leq x < 16.5$ ,  $n=35$ ), and Right ( $x \geq 16.5$ ,  $n=45$ ). We then created five variables: news consumption from (1) left-, (2) skews left-, (3) neutral-, (4) skews right-, and (5) right-leaning sources. This array of measures characterized heterogeneities stemming from both (a) ideological asymmetries (using sources with different ideological slants) and (b) political involvement (consuming news with varying amounts).

## Analytic strategies

To test H1a/b and H2a/b, we employed the interrupted time series (ITS) design with the following equation:

$$y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T + \beta_2 X_t + \beta_3 H_t + \beta_4 TX_t + \alpha_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where  $y_{it}$  was the outcome,  $T$  was the relative time distance from the first day of the post-intervention period, and  $X_t$  was a dummy treatment variable ( $1 = \text{post-intervention}$ ). The interaction term  $TX_t$  was included to allow for separate temporal trends before and after the intervention. Here,  $\beta_1$  captured the pre-intervention trend,  $\beta_2$  was the immediate effect of the intervention,  $\beta_4$  was the trend change after the intervention, and  $\beta_1 + \beta_4$  indicated the post-intervention trend. As we observed that panelists used Twitter less frequently on public holidays and weekends, a dummy variable  $H_t$  with 1 indicating these days was added as a control. We also included panelists' IDs as fixed effects ( $\alpha_i$ ).

We also fitted the regression model in equation (1) for each panelist separately (excluding  $\alpha_i$ ), with Twitter and alternative domain use as the dependent variables, respectively. To answer RQ1, we identified panelists as new users of alternative domains if they had a coefficient  $\beta_2$  (immediate effect) or  $\beta_1 + \beta_4$  (post-trend) larger than zero, which indicated an immediate increase or increasing trend in alternative domain use following the event. Their Twitter use coefficients characterized whether these new users of alternative domains reduced their Twitter usage.

We answered RQ2a and RQ3a by using complementary cumulative distribution function (CCDF) curves to illustrate the Twitter use coefficients (i.e.  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_4$  in equation (1)) for different user groups, each visiting news sources with the corresponding ideological slant (left, skews left, neutral, skews right, and right) and consuming news with different amounts (1+, 5+, and 10+ pageviews). To formally test the pattern characterized by the CCDF plots, we conducted regression analyses: We regressed panelists' Twitter use coefficients by their news consumption of ideologically differentiated outlets.

Finally, to answer RQ2b and RQ3b, we conducted a domain-level analysis to capture panelists' changing usage patterns of multiple domains. Within each ideological group, we calculated the average proportion of each domain's daily active users (DAU) before and after the deplatforming, respectively. We ranked all domains in each group according to their DAU change (after–before) and reported the results of 60 domains that exhibited the most significant increase (30 domains) or decrease (30 domains) in DAU. By doing so, we could identify if any alternative domains exhibited a user increase among a specific group, after Twitter deplatformed Donald Trump.

## Results

### Overall effects of the deplatforming

We conducted ITS models to estimate the effects of deplatforming Trump on panelists' Twitter and alternative domain use (see Table 1). The immediate effect on Twitter use

**Table 1.** OLS regression models estimating the effects of the deplatforming.

	Twitter use	Alternative domain use
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)
Intervention	-0.0013 (0.0031)	0.0585*** (0.0077)
Time	0.0038*** (0.0008)	0.0057** (0.0020)
Public Holidays/Weekends	-0.0121*** (0.0011)	-0.0151*** (0.0029)
Intervention × Time	-0.0041*** (0.0008)	-0.0072*** (0.0020)
Fixed Effects for Panelists	Yes	Yes
N of Observations	570,400	201,802
N of Panelists	12,400	4,387
Adj. $R^2$	0.456	0.438

Note. Dependent variables were log-transformed. All models employed robust standard errors accounting for clustering at panelist level.

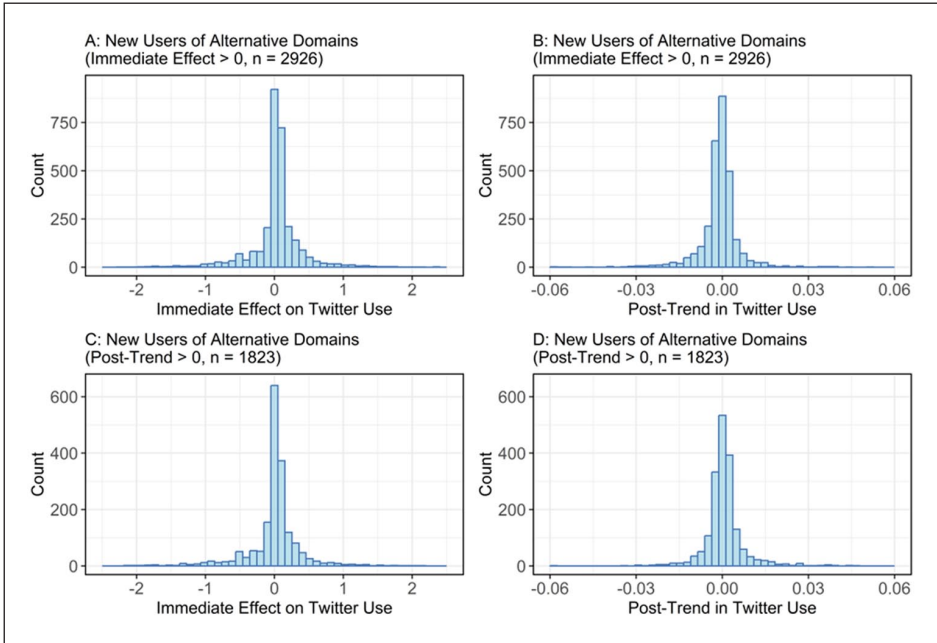
\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

was not significant ( $b = -0.0013$ ,  $p = .6862$ ), thus failing to support H1a. However, the deplatforming significantly (though lightly) altered the temporal trend in panelists' Twitter use ( $b = -0.0041$ ,  $p < .001$ ), shifting from an increasing trend before the event ( $b = 0.0038$ ,  $p < .001$ ) to a slight decline, which supported H1b.

In terms of alternative domain use, the immediate impact was positively significant ( $b = 0.0585$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating a 6% increase and supporting H2a. The event also significantly altered the temporal trend in alternative domain use but in a negative direction ( $b = -0.0072$ ,  $p < .001$ ), thus not supporting H2b. Together, these findings suggest that on average, panelists did not immediately change their Twitter usage following the suspension of @realDonaldTrump on Twitter; however, their engagement with this platform declined slightly over time. In addition, panelists markedly increased their visits to alternative domains, but this surge gradually diminished after this event.

### *Relationship between non-use and new use*

Figure 1 presents the distributions of Twitter use coefficients, including immediate effect ( $\beta_2$ ) and post-intervention trend ( $\beta_1 + \beta_4$ ), among alternative domain new users. The visualization reveals that Twitter use coefficients were distributed along the zero line, indicating that new users of alternative domains may not necessarily reduce their Twitter usage. We then conducted the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests to investigate whether Twitter use coefficients were significantly less than zero. Among new users with a sudden increase in using alternative domains (Panels a and b), their immediate changes in Twitter usage were not significantly less than zero (pseudo-median = 0.0430,  $p = 1$ ); their post-intervention trends in Twitter usage were significant but very close to zero (pseudo-median = -0.0006,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, among new users with an increasing post-trend



**Figure 1.** Distributions of Twitter use coefficients of alternative domain new users. Note. Panels (a) and (b) include new users with a sudden increase in using alternative domains ( $n = 2926$ ). Panels (c) and (d) include new users with an increasing post-trend in alternative domain use ( $n = 1823$ ). We fitted the model in equation (1) for each alternative domain new user to obtain the immediate effect (see Panels (a) and (c)) and post-trend in their Twitter use (see Panels (b) and (d)). For better visualization, we removed 14 alternative domain new users as their Twitter use coefficients fell outside the scale.

in alternative domain use (Panels c and d), both their immediate changes (pseudo-median=0.0245,  $p=1$ ) and post-trends in Twitter usage (pseudo-median=0.0003,  $p=.9997$ ) were not significantly less than zero. These results suggest that new use of alternative domains was not necessarily associated with the reduced Twitter usage.

### *Heterogeneities of the impact on Twitter use*

Figure 2 presents the CCDF curves of Twitter use coefficients, including both immediate effect and slope change, across users grouped by ideologically differentiated news consumption. A user could be categorized into multiple groups if they visited news domains from more than one ideological category. As shown in Panels (a) and (b), the five groups of panelists—each with at least one pageview in the corresponding news domains—exhibited similar patterns of Twitter use in reaction to Trump’s deplatforming, as the five CCDF curves mostly overlap.

Panels (c) and (d) focus on the subset of individuals who consumed at least ten pages within a specific ideological category of news domains, which demonstrated different patterns. Among these frequent news consumers, right-leaning individuals

showed a larger decrease in their Twitter usage than other groups, while left-leaning individuals exhibited a sudden increase (see Panel (c) for the immediate change  $\beta_2$ ). As for the temporal trend, right-leaning individuals were more likely to have a negative shift in Twitter use over time following the deplatforming event (see Panel (d) for the trend change  $\beta_4$ ).

Statistical tests were conducted to formally investigate the aforementioned observations (see Panels (e) and (f)). We regressed immediate effect and slope change, respectively, using a sample restricted to news consumers (those not meeting the news consumption thresholds were excluded from this analysis). The predictors were four dummy variables equal to one indicating a panelist consuming the corresponding ideological category of news (left, skews left, skews right, and right) at varying levels of involvement (1+, 5+, and 10+ pageviews). By doing so, we set the reference group as those who only visited neutral news domains. The analysis reveals that frequent left-leaning news consumers (5+ and 10+ pageviews) exhibited a larger sudden increase in Twitter use than the reference group, which is consistent with the CCDF results. However, the observed reduction in Twitter usage among frequent right-leaning news consumers was not statistically significant (also see SI S5 for more details).

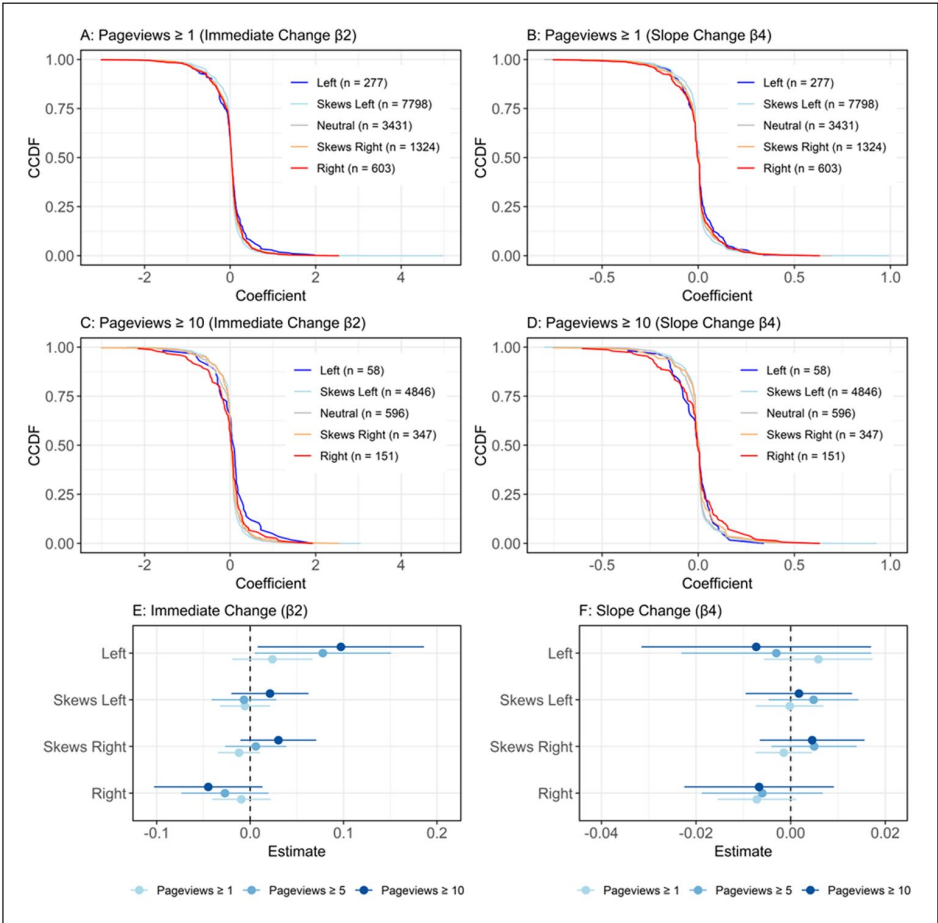
### *Heterogeneities in impact on usage of other domains*

Figures 3 and 4 show the DAU change of 60 domains that exhibited the largest increase (30 domains) or decrease (30 domains) within each user group. Here, we only present social media platforms and information websites among these domains. The full lists were provided in SI S6. Figure 5 summarizes the DAU changes.

*Increase in alternative platform use.* Figure 3 clearly illustrates the ideological asymmetry in migration patterns. Following the deplatforming of Trump on Twitter, a certain proportion of skews right- and right-leaning news consumers increased their usage of several alternative social media platforms, including Gab, BitChute, Rumble, and MeWe. The proportion was much larger among right-leaning news consumers. For example, the DAU change for BitChute was 1.14% among the skews right, and the number increased to 3.12% among the right. Gab and Rumble also displayed a similar pattern. Overall, alternative social media users increased by 2.92% and 8.91% among skews right- and right-leaning news consumers, respectively. However, none of these alternative social media sites showed up among the top 30 increasing domains for skews left- or left-leaning news consumers.

*Decrease in usage of alternative information websites.* Unexpectedly, right-leaning news consumers *reduced* their visits (-5.23%) to alternative information websites, including *The Epoch Times* and *The Gateway Pundit*. This pattern did not appear among skews left- and left-leaning news consumers.

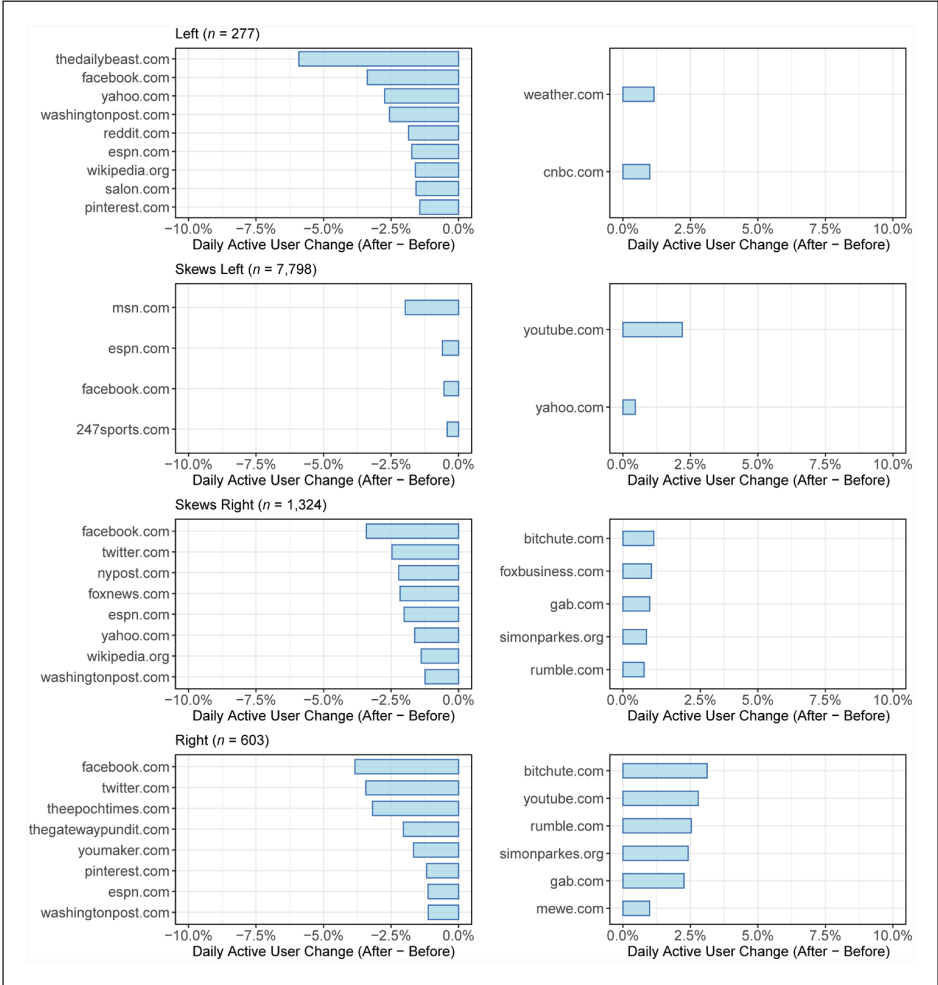
*Larger effects on frequent news consumers.* The migration pattern of right-leaning users was particularly pronounced within the group consuming the most news information



**Figure 2.** Complementary cumulative distribution function curves for Twitter use change in reaction to the deplatforming.

Note. The coefficients (i.e.  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_4$  in equation (1)) indicate the change in Twitter usage for each panelist in response to the deplatforming event. In Panels (a)–(d), a user could be categorized into multiple groups if they visited news domains from more than one ideological category. In Panels (e) and (f), the reference group for the regressions includes users who only visited neutral news domains.

(Figure 4). Specifically, among those who consumed at least one news webpage from right-leaning outlets, the increase in alternative social media users was 8.91%, which rose to 12.26% for those who visited 10 or more pages. This increase was less prominent among the skews right group (10+ visitors: 4.18%; 1+ visitors: 2.92%). In addition, there was a more substantial decrease in the viewership of alternative information websites among frequent consumers of right-leaning news (10+ visitors: -12.25%; 1+ visitors: -5.23%).

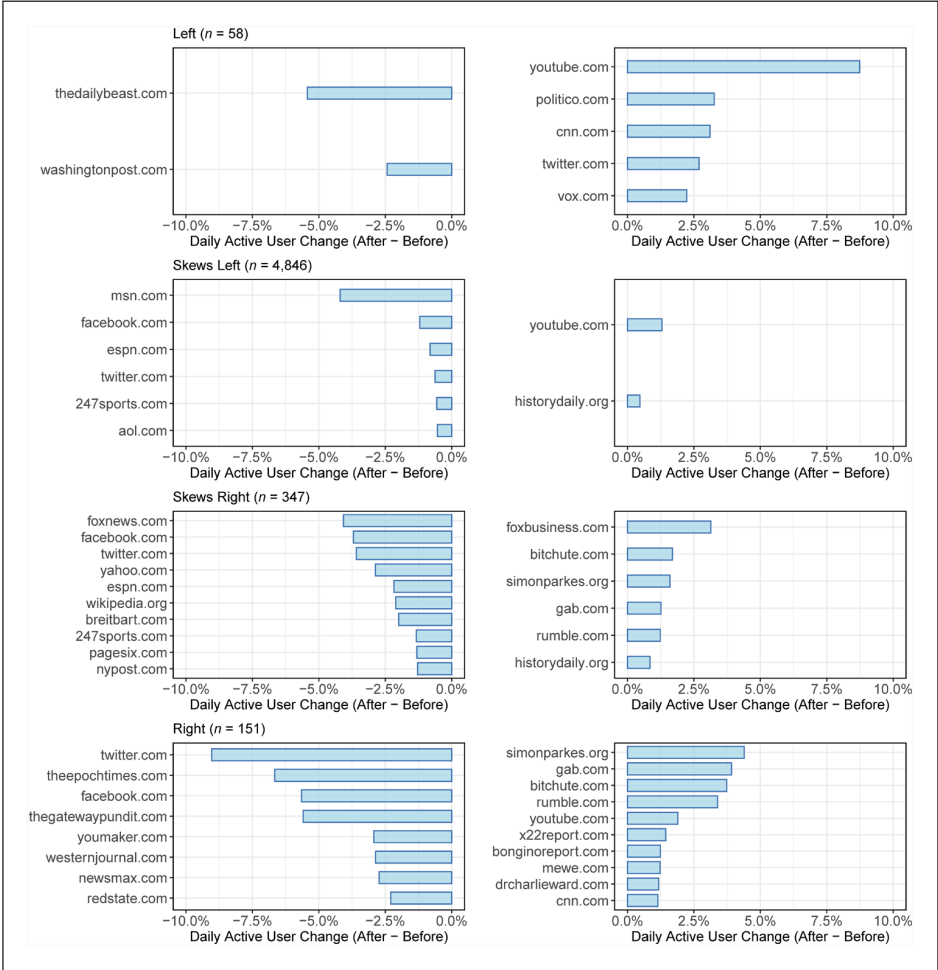


**Figure 3.** Platform migration in reaction to the deplatforming (Pageviews  $\geq 1$ ).

Note. Users were assigned to an ideological group if they visited at least one page in a news domain with that ideological slant. This figure only presents social media platforms and information websites within the top 60 domains that exhibited the most significant increase (30 domains) or decrease (30 domains) in DAU within each ideological group. For the full list, see Supplementary Information (Figures S4.1a–S4.12a).

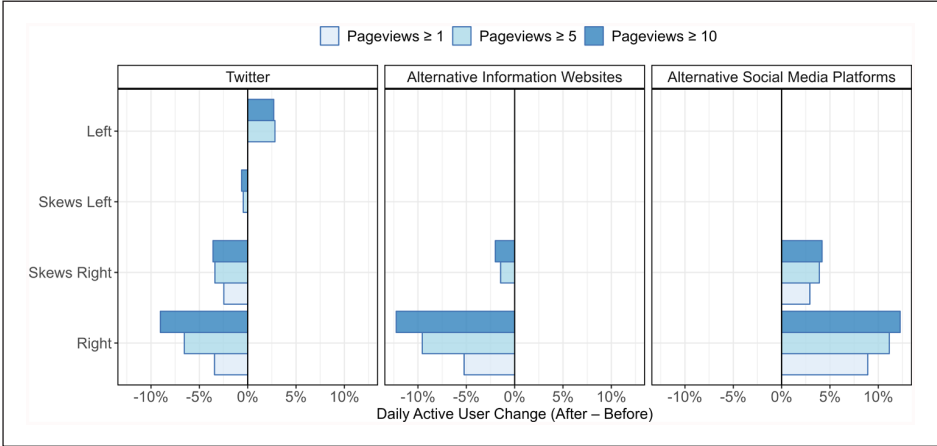
### Robustness checks and placebo tests

We conducted a series of robustness checks regarding model specifications and observation window length (see SI S3-6 for details). We also did several placebo tests to enhance our causal identification (SI S9-10). Notably, we checked whether our findings could be attributed to confounding events, especially the January 6 Capitol attack, using YouTube as a comparative case. Specifically, the January 6 event should influence both Twitter and YouTube, but the key difference is that YouTube deplatformed Trump five days after



**Figure 4.** Platform migration in reaction to the deplatforming (Pageviews  $\geq$  10). Note. Users were assigned to an ideological group if they visited at least 10 pages in news domains with that ideological slant.

Twitter’s action. In addition, Trump had substantively fewer followers on YouTube (2.8M vs 88M on Twitter before 6 January 2021), suggesting a much smaller pool of users potentially affected by the later deplatforming on this platform. If our findings were explained primarily by Trump’s deplatforming rather than other confounding events, the effects should diminish or even disappear in this placebo test. The results mostly aligned with our expectations; the only exception was that the negatively significant (but slight) trend change repeated in this test (see SI S10 for details). To further strengthen our causal identification, we also conducted difference-in-differences (DiD) analyses using YouTube users as the control group with a focus on the short observation window before YouTube



**Figure 5.** Daily active user change in reaction to the deplatforming.

Note. This figure is an aggregation of the analyses in Figures 3 and 4. It also focuses on the top 60 domains with the most increase or decrease in DAU. For exact percentage values, see Table S4.1 in SI (S4).

deplatformed Trump. These analyses produced qualitatively similar results supporting our causal claims (see SI S11).

## Discussion

This study offers a comprehensive investigation into how deplatforming a high-profile actor shapes the information behaviors of general users who do not experience direct moderation. Through an analysis at the level of the information ecosystem, we explore user reactions to a specific deplatforming event across platforms and other sites. Specifically, we focus on how Twitter users changed their Twitter usage and migrated to alternative domains after the US President, Donald Trump, was banned from this social media platform.

### *Content moderation in the information ecosystem*

Scholarships on content moderation have highlighted two underlying values behind social media platforms’ moderation practices. First, content moderation prevents online abuses in accordance with evolving public speech norms that define what content and behaviors are deemed objectionable (De Keulenaar et al., 2023; Grimmelmann, 2015). Meanwhile, these practices are inevitably shaped by profit considerations, as social media platforms operate as commercial enterprises striving to maximize user engagement (Gillespie, 2018). These two values may conflict and give rise to controversies surrounding moderation practices. Our study showed that although Twitter’s action to deplatform Trump had no immediate impact on individuals’ Twitter usage, their engagement with the platform slightly decreased over time. The gradual decline in Twitter use reflects the tension between content moderation as a public good and platforms’ financial

incentives. While deplatforming may align with normative goals (e.g. reducing harmful content), its long-term impact on user retention highlights the risks platforms face when prioritizing moderation.

Moreover, considering the broader information ecosystem, content moderation, and deplatforming in particular, can yield unintended consequences. Previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of deplatforming for social media platforms to address online abuses (Jhaver et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2024). The positive outcome can extend even beyond the digital realm to offline settings (e.g. Durán et al., 2024). However, we find that following the suspension of Trump's Twitter account, users increased their usage of alternative domains that feature lax content moderation. These fringe spaces are widely adopted by extreme communities, within which abundant extreme ideologies and anti-social viewpoints are widely circulated (Baele et al., 2023; Dehghan and Nagappa, 2022; Ophir et al., 2023; Robinson, 2022). The deplatforming exercise on Twitter may, therefore, inadvertently foster user engagement with malicious content outside the platform. This unintended consequence highlights the need to consider the collective interest of the ecosystem as a whole rather than focusing exclusively on a single platform.

### *Heterogeneities of platform migration*

The aforementioned pattern is not even across the population. We observe an ideological asymmetry in user reactions to the deplatforming event: Only individuals who consumed skews right- and right-leaning news increasingly used alternative social media platforms. Previous studies have documented the migration of certain deplatformed right-wing activists to alternative platforms (Freelon et al., 2020; Rogers, 2020). Our research contributes by showing that some general users—those unaffected by direct moderation—can also increase their visits to alternative spaces following the deplatforming of a prominent right-wing figure.

Moreover, our findings highlight the importance of political involvement in shaping differentiated user reactions. Among skews right- and right-leaning news consumers, a small group—the heavy consumers—were more likely to navigate to alternative social media platforms. This aligns with Krupnikov and Ryan (2022): Individuals who are deeply involved in politics exhibit a much greater interest and higher levels of activity in political behaviors compared to the less involved. Despite constituting a tiny fraction of the population, the deeply involved can exert a disproportionate impact on the information ecosystem. For example, with high levels of online activity, their voices on social media tend to be amplified (Bail, 2021). Therefore, future research should devote more attention to this small group of people, given their large impact on the online sphere.

In addition to user heterogeneities, our results also suggest that alternative domains are not homogeneous. Unlike alternative social media platforms, skews right- and right-leaning news consumers *decreased* their visits to alternative information websites, those widely known for spreading misinformation (Benkler et al., 2018). This decline may reflect the success of the post-January 6 moderation efforts that markedly curbed misinformation circulation on Twitter (McCabe et al., 2024), thereby limiting the reach of these alternative information websites. The heterogeneity among alternative domains has received scant attention in previous studies, as they focused mostly on social media

without considering the interplay between these platforms and information websites (e.g. Buntain et al., 2023; Klinenberg, 2023; Rauchfleisch and Kaiser, 2024). Future research should explore the differentiations that exist within alternative domains and examine how various factors can explain such differences.

### *Rethinking platform migration and the information ecosystem*

Prior research often posits that platform migration entails the simultaneous departure from one platform and the initiation of use on another (Edwards and Boellstorff, 2021). However, our study reveals that non-use and new use did not consistently occur in tandem, suggesting that the two processes of platform migration are separate dynamics. This is in line with previous literature that highlights the non-exclusive pattern of multi-platform navigation (e.g. Fiesler and Dym, 2020; Jeong et al., 2024; Kumar et al., 2011). Users can disengage from Twitter, for example, without joining Truth Social, or they might experiment with alternative platforms while maintaining their original usage patterns. To better capture this complexity, we propose treating non-use and new use as separate dimensions when studying platform migration.

Through the information ecosystem-level analysis, this study investigates cross-platform dynamics in response to a deplatforming event. We believe that this perspective can also provide insights into other inter-platform phenomena, such as platform emergence, evolution, and disappearance, which shape interdependencies among various digital entities and users. One example is the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk in 2022, which profoundly changed content moderation practices as well as the platform culture. This ecosystem-level perspective should illuminate how users flow across the information ecosystem accordingly.

### *Limitations and future research*

Our research is subject to several limitations that point to avenues for future work. First, we focus exclusively on the deplatforming of Trump on Twitter within the US context. While this case holds significant relevance due to Twitter's important role in the information landscape as well as in Trump's campaigns and presidency, the generalizability of our findings to other cases should be tested. Second, we specifically confine our scope to ideological asymmetry and political involvement; other factors, like demographics, could also shape heterogeneous user behaviors and warrant investigation. Third, we categorize ideological groups based on users' news consumption. Future studies should incorporate additional measures, including their self-reports, for a more direct assessment of an individual's ideological stance. In addition, our list of alternative domains contains most sites mentioned in the literature, but it may not be exhaustive, and there are notable differences among them.<sup>2</sup> We encourage future research to further theorize and examine the distinctions among different types within the alternative group. Another limitation is that our data are desktop-only, excluding mobile and tablet usage. Thus, we are unable to capture any potential cross-device behaviors, which should be addressed in future work given the increasingly mobile nature of social media engagement. Finally, we do not consider the role of offline media (e.g. TV, newspapers). Future research

should employ other methods, such as surveys and ethnographic approaches, to investigate the broader information ecosystem encompassing both online and offline media realms.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that deplatforming a high-profile figure triggers platform migration among general users across the information ecosystem, yielding consequences beyond the enacting platform. This migration manifests as separate dynamics rather than a unitary process: After Twitter deplatformed Donald Trump, users increased visits to alternative domains while this surge did not necessarily stem from reduced Twitter engagement. Moreover, the heterogeneous reaction patterns uncovered in our analysis underscore how content moderation exerts ripple effects according to users' political ideology and involvement. Taken together, these findings call for platform governance models that adopt an ecosystem-wide perspective, recognizing that the effectiveness of content moderation is contingent upon user reactions across various interconnected digital spaces.

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## Data availability statement

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to its proprietary nature.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. We aimed to examine the reactions of general users who were not deplatformed by Twitter during the observation period. Unfortunately, we were not able to check the suspension status of Twitter users in the ComScore panel. We estimated the proportion of suspended accounts based on McCabe et al. (2024), which showed that about 0.23% of active link-sharing Twitter accounts were suspended in January 2021. This suggests that more than 99.7% of active Twitter users in January 2021 did not face the deplatforming intervention.

2. As we mentioned above, alternative domains defined in this study involves a notable difference within the group as some were born out of the alt movement while others were created not for the movement but later adopted and utilized by its adherents. To partly address this issue and enhance the robustness of our findings, as suggested by one reviewer, we removed Discord and Signal, two “non-alt-born” domains, from the alternative domain list and re-ran the analysis. The results remained consistent, as detailed in Supplementary Information (SI S5).

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