NARAL
PRO-CHOICE AMERICA

YouTube's Role in Public Perceptions of Abortion Care: The Landscape of YouTube Abortion Content and Disinformation

Executive Summary

As advocates continue the fight for reproductive freedom in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, which paved the way for cruel and dangerous bans on abortion, it is crucial to understand what messages and disinformation about abortion care the public may be exposed to. Given that YouTube is a [major source](#) of entertainment and news for people in the United States, NARAL Pro-Choice America worked to identify which actors, content forms, and narratives about abortion care dominated the platform.[1]

Key findings include:
- The most prominent types of content relating to abortion on YouTube can be broken down into four major categories: mainstream news, partisan niche news, political entertainment shows, and conservative activism.
- Medical disinformation—such as false claims about the safety of abortion and propaganda misrepresenting methods of abortion care—and other misleading anti-choice content frequently appeared within the first 10-20 results for abortion-related search queries.
- About half of high-performing abortion-related content on YouTube was politically centrist, and there were far more right-leaning sources than left-leaning ones.
- Right-leaning sources produced the majority of high-performing content about abortion following the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe*.
- Political entertainment shows' discussions of abortion were one of the most viewed content forms and tended to reinforce the politicization of abortion care.
- Content dedicated specifically to opposing abortion was part of a larger ecosystem of far-right Christian content. The consumption of anti-choice videos immediately leads to recommendations of more general far-right and religious content, suggesting that anti-choice content may serve as an on-ramp into far-right rabbit holes.
- Abortion "storytime" videos in which young people recounted their own experiences with abortion care were a common result of abortion-related searches.

Our research identified two key areas of concern about YouTube as a source of information about abortion care:
- [Anti-choice disinformation](#) has been prominent on the platform and bolsters the movement's efforts to lie to, confuse, and mislead the public about abortion care. Anti-choice and conservative advocacy groups that continuously produce disinformation about abortion care are offered a platform on YouTube.
- The right [dominates political discourse](#) on YouTube and inflammatory and reactionary political content overperforms on the platform, meaning that a disproportionate amount of high-performing content about abortion politicizes and/or attacks reproductive rights. Such sources engage anti-choice messaging tactics, amplify dangerous disinformation from bad actors, and reinforce the falsehood that abortion is a divisive moral and political issue rather than a fundamental freedom supported by the vast majority of people.

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[1] This research was conducted at the beginning of 2022, prior to YouTube's announcment of a [policy](#) to moderate abortion mis/disinformation.

Social media platforms like YouTube have a responsibility to ensure users receive accurate information about abortion, particularly as we navigate a post-*Roe* landscape where access to care has become severely limited or completely blocked for millions of people.

On July 21, 2022, YouTube announced a plan to address mis/disinformation about abortion care, including steps to prioritize quality information in search results for abortion-related queries and to remove videos promoting medical disinformation about abortion care. Based on the findings of this research, the platform should expand on these steps by de-platforming actors who repeatedly spread disinformation and acknowledging that far-right information ecosystems contribute to attacks on reproductive freedom and other core rights. YouTube should also revise the platform's algorithmic model so that it no longer enables far-right echo chambers, and make more efforts to raise the voices of people who have sought abortion care.

Methodology

NARAL used NewsWhip Spike social media analytics to monitor the highest-performing, recently-uploaded YouTube content mentioning abortion or related terms over an 8-week period beginning in January 2022. We narrowed this sample to videos with at least 300 views at the date collected (479 videos total) and analyzed the content to identify their political lean, major themes, and content types. Following the leak and final release of the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization,* we identified the 50 most-viewed videos mentioning abortion between May 6 and July 6, 2022, and performed a similar analysis.

Additionally, we investigated the top search results for queries and key terms related to abortion using a new Google account with no browser history to better understand the landscape of older content that users might surface while browsing on YouTube. Lastly, we conducted a two-week-long experiment in which we created a separate YouTube account that only searched for and viewed anti-choice content with the goal of better understanding what types of content YouTube's algorithm might promote to users with anti-choice beliefs.

Summary of High-Performing Source Types and Content Forms

Our analysis of the highest performing, recently uploaded content about abortion each week identified four key thematic categories. These classifications describe the most frequently occurring types of videos that discuss abortion care and reproductive rights.

- **Center news:** Politically centrist news coverage of abortion, spanning the [spectrum](#) of center-left to center-right (e.g., PBS, CNN, local news stations, English-language global news networks)
- **Partisan niche news:** News and political entertainment with a partisan lens that is more often right-leaning (e.g., EWNT Global Catholic Network, Fox News, The Daily Wire)
- **Political entertainment streaming shows:** Podcasts and streaming shows produced by political influencers dedicated to reviews of current events, politics, and popular culture (e.g., The Young Turks, Ben Shapiro, Michael Knowles)

- **Far-right and anti-choice advocacy organizations:** The YouTube channels of conservative and far-right advocacy organizations—often explicitly Christian— that produce content to support their agendas and frequently promote disinformation (e.g., Focus on the Family, Students for Life, Turning Point USA)

Just over half of the sources in our sample were politically center-aligned (54%), while right-leaning sources outnumbered left-leaning ones at 35% compared to 11% — a finding which reflects that the right has historically [been the dominant political community](#) on the platform. Conservative sources are incentivized to attack reproductive freedom and are frequent purveyors of disinformation about abortion care. Their dominance poses a major concern to the accuracy of information about abortion care that viewers are likely to encounter on YouTube.

Update in Light of the Supreme Court's Ruling Overturning *Roe*

In light of both the leak of the Supreme Court's draft opinion decision in *Jackson Women's Health* and the release of the final decision that overturned *Roe*, the landscape of YouTube content related to abortion has shifted due to the explosion of news coverage and national attention paid to abortion rights and access.

In the three weeks following the leak of the draft opinion and the release of the final opinion in *Jackson Women's Health,* right-wing sources heavily dominated the conversation at 58% of the total sample. This content primarily consisted of Fox News coverage (which published 15 of the 50 most-viewed videos) and conservative political influencer shows by far-right, anti-choice commentators like Steven Crowder and Matt Walsh.

Mainstream news coverage made up about 28% of the sample and left-leaning content, primarily consisting of clips from late-night television talk shows, was only 14% of the sample. Notably, recommended videos for abortion-related searches after the leaked draft opinion in *Jackson Women's Health* were heavily dominated by the news. In the months before the leaked draft opinion, results included a greater variety of sources.

Abortion As an Assumed Part of Political Identity

On both the right and the left, political entertainment streaming shows were the most viewed type of content, making up nearly half of the total views of the sample. These shows typically consist of cisgender male political personalities (such as Ben Shapiro) reviewing recent news events and can be viewed as part of a larger genre of masculine "hot take" content on the platform. Consistent with the YouTube algorithm's [preference for reactionary content](#), they rely on mocking their opposition and inciting feelings of anger and superiority in viewers.

This hyper-partisan, reactionary content reinforces the politicization of abortion rights and the assumption that one's opinion on abortion must align with the ideology of their political party. Right-leaning podcasts attacked reproductive freedom as part of their promotion of a larger far-right worldview, and their arguments commonly criticized the left as being immoral and "illogical." Left-leaning [content](#) of this general type can also reinforce politicization by alienating conflicted people who support abortion access but may not identify as being politically left.

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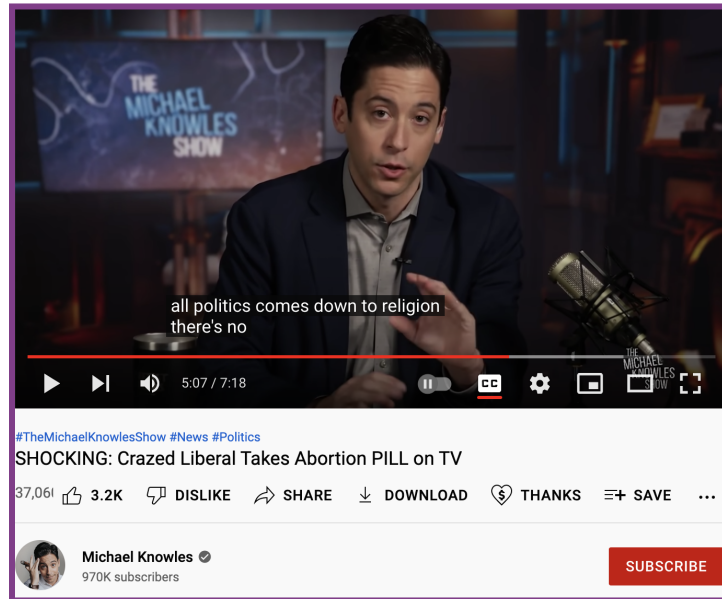
Screenshot of a video entitled "SHOCKING: Crazed Liberal Takes Abortion PILL on TV" by far-right political personality Michael Knowles. The video features Knowles arguing that "all politics comes down to religion."

Anti-Choice Content as an On-Ramp to Far-Right Religious Indoctrination

Our test of what the YouTube algorithm would recommend to a viewer who consumed anti-choice content quickly revealed a broader ecosystem of far-right Christian ideology on the platform. Content dedicated specifically to anti-choice messaging was almost exclusively produced by far-right Christian advocacy organizations and media outlets. Viewing or clicking on this content led to further recommendations of videos produced by hyper-conservative Evangelical and Catholic channels.

The prevalence of these channels is consistent with the history of [conservative media activism](#) and suggests that far-right Christian groups view YouTube as a key venue for public persuasion. In addition to attacking reproductive freedom, these channels promoted misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic propaganda, indicating that viewers of anti-choice content could be led down dangerous, radicalizing rabbit holes.
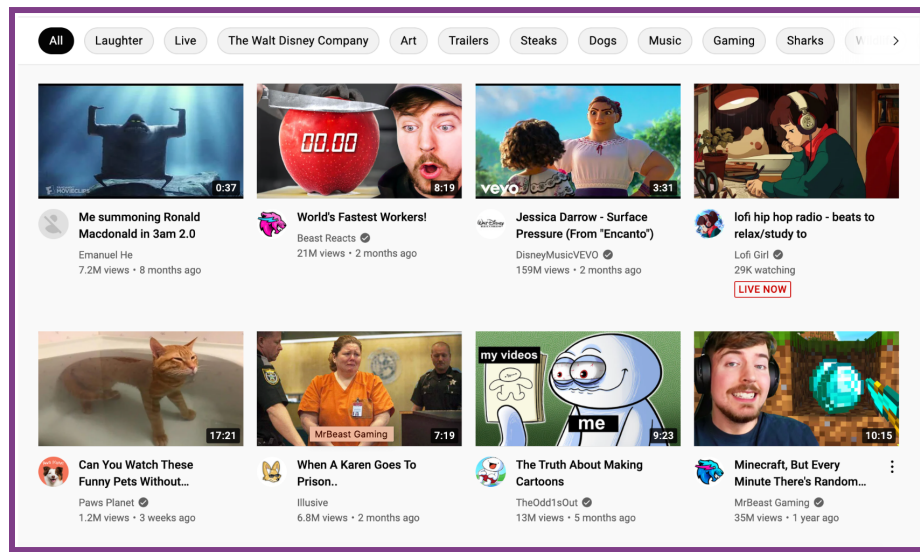
Screenshot of YouTube's homepage before consuming anti-choice content. Suggested videos are made up of popular culture and YouTuber content and include no political content.
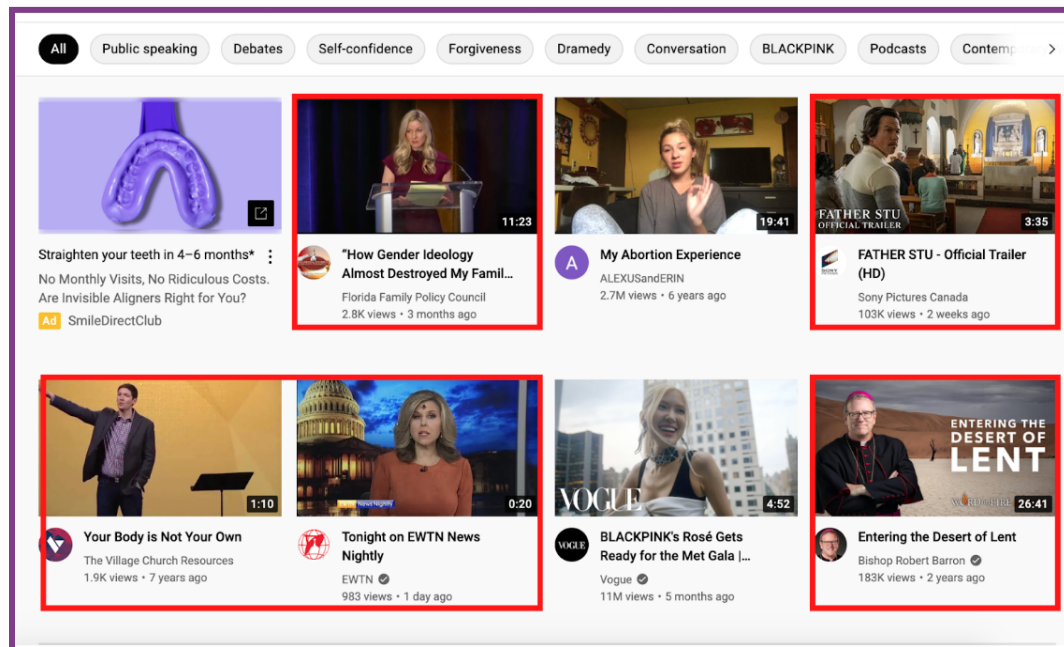
Screenshot of YouTube's homepage after consuming only anti-choice content for two weeks. The homepage is dominated by religious content, including three videos from anti-choice Christian channels and one anti-trans video from right-wing advocacy group Florida Family Policy Council. One abortion "storytime" video is also included.

Prevalence of Disinformation About Abortion Care

When NARAL conducted this research, abortion-related queries on YouTube quickly led viewers to anti-choice videos promoting disinformation about abortion care, which aim to bolster support for restricting care. While the platform appeared to make an effort to promote reliable and medically

accurate information within the first five results for the search "abortion," narrower abortion-related queries such as "abortion procedure" and "abortion pill" produced results that promoted disinformation or propaganda within the first 10–15 videos The platform did not appear to fact-check or remove inaccurate content by anti-choice disinformers, enabling these actors to target viewers searching for medical information with falsehoods.

For instance, YouTube did not seem to moderate content dedicated to what anti-choice activists refer to as medication abortion "reversal," an unproven practice that is not supported by scientific evidence or reliable research. Searching "abortion breast cancer" surfaced videos promoting the repeatedly-debunked myth that abortion causes breast cancer, and videos fearmongering about abortion later in pregnancy were also commonly included in the first 10-20 results for abortion-related searches. This includes promoting disinformation about so-called "post-birth abortion" and "infanticide", which inflammatory anti-choice myths coined by the anti-choice movement in order to elicit an emotional response.

Notably, as of July 27, 2022 (a week after YouTube's announcement to moderate abortion-related disinformation), searches for "abortion reversal" and "abortion breast cancer" still garnered disinformation within the 10 results, suggesting that anti-choice disinformation is as of yet still not being effectively moderated.

Disinformation is a long-standing tool in the anti-choice playbook, used to intimidate and coerce people out of seeking abortion care and promote cruel bans that attack people's fundamental freedoms—which disproportionately affect Black,Indigenous, Latinx,Asian American & Pacific Islander, and other people of color, those working to make ends meet, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, young people, those living in rural communities, and people with disabilities. False information about abortion care directly harms people, who deserve access to the accurate, unbiased medical information they need in order to make the best decisions they can for their lives and families.
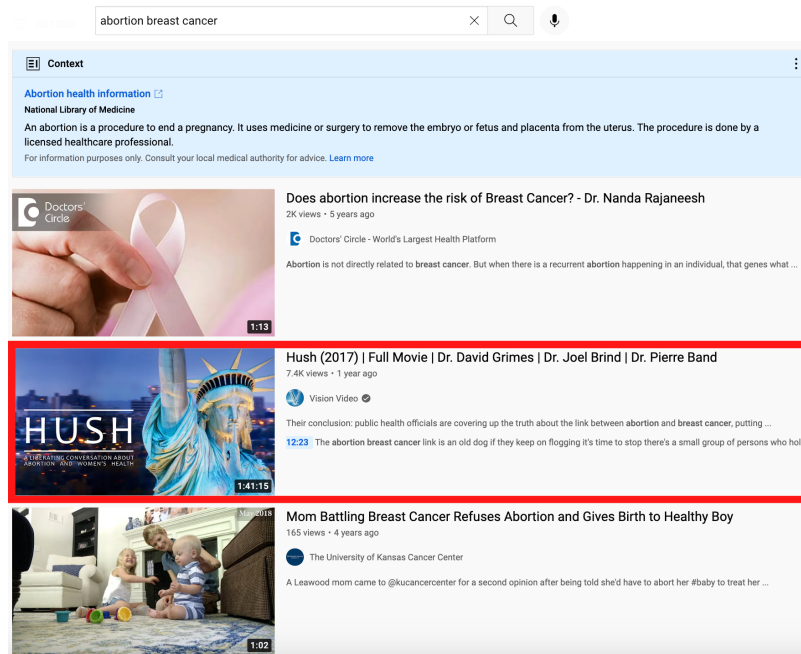
Screenshot of the first three results for the serach "abortion breast cancer." The second result is a documentary called "Hush" that conspires that public health officials "are covering up the link between abortion and breast cancer."
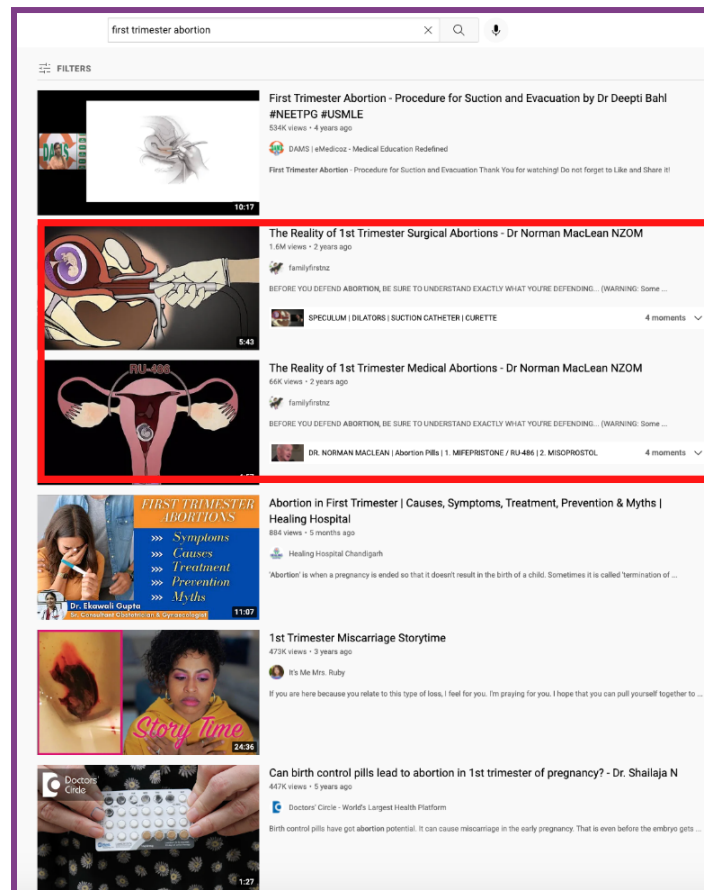
Screenshot of the first six results for the search "first-trimester abortion," which includes two anti-choice videos falsely claiming to be medically accurate depictions of abortion care.
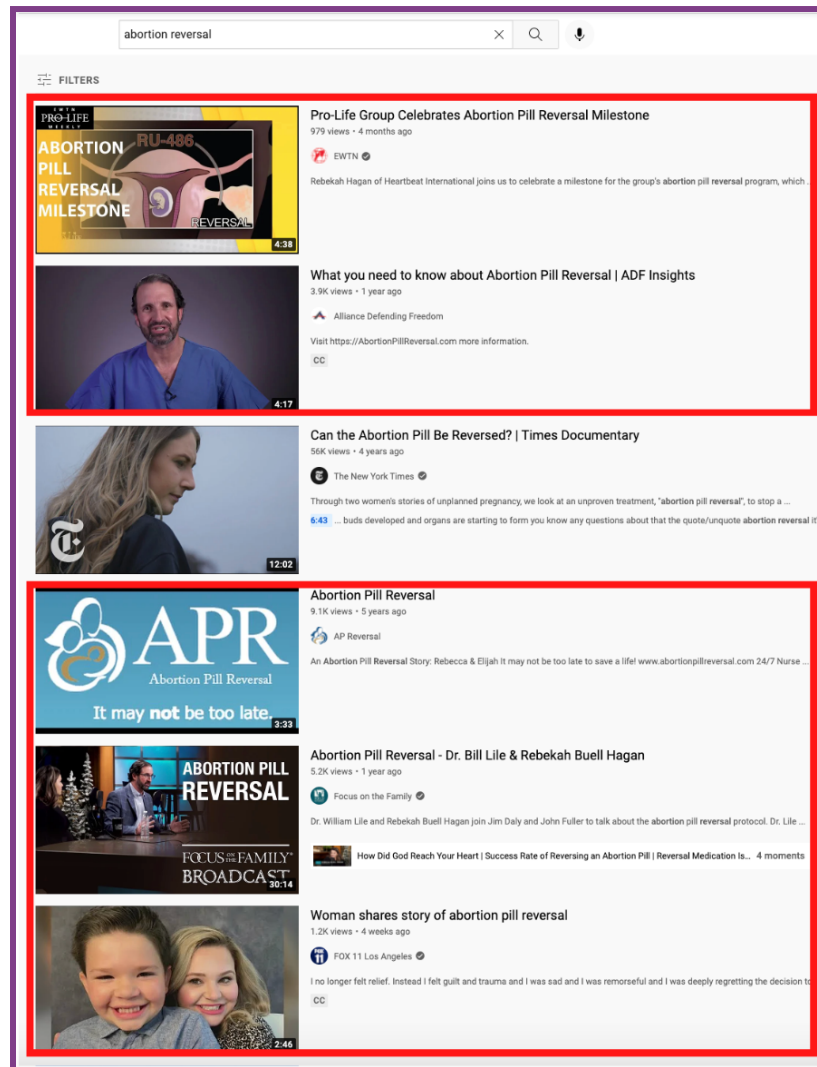
Screenshot of the first six results for the search "abortion reversal." Five of six videos were published by anti-choice activists and promoted the practice. The other video was published by the New York Times. While the Times' did debunk it it also interviewed anti-choice doctors making false claims.

Abortion "Storytime" Videos

Abortion "storytime" videos were common results for abortion-related queries (particularly "abortion pill" and "abortion experience"), and the searches "abortion storytime" and "abortion stories women tell" were some of the top predicted searches for the term "abortion." In these videos, YouTube creators, who are most commonly beauty bloggers or micro-influencers, utilize the "storytime" social media trend to speak about the circumstances that led them to need an abortion and discuss their experiences with abortion care. This was the only prominent content we identified during this research produced by YouTuber creators with smaller audiences and by people who have sought abortion care.
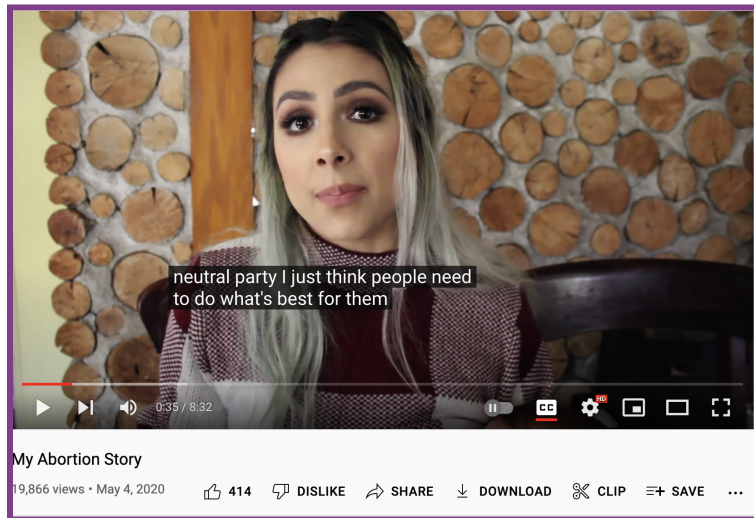
Screenshot of an example of a "storytime" YouTube video entitled "My Abortion Story," in which a YouTube creator addresses the camera and says, "I just think people need to do what's best for them."

While a few of the top results for "abortion storytime" were videos featuring individuals who did not follow through with a planned abortion or regretted an abortion, most of this content promoted compassion and understanding for those seeking care. Many of the video creators said that their goal in producing such content was to offer knowledge and empathy to others seeking abortion care or who have received abortion care, specifically stating that they had no political agenda. A belief many of the creators shared was that everyone should have the freedom to make the best decisions for themselves.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Social media platforms like YouTube play a key role in shaping public perceptions of abortion care. They have an urgent responsibility to provide reliable information, especially as anti-choice lawmakers continue to enforce bans and restrictions on abortion that block millions of people from accessing the care they need in their states and communities.

YouTube recently announced new policies cracking down on mis/disinformation about abortion care, though early reviews of the new policies suggest they will be largely inadequate. The effort will include removing videos that make false medical claims about abortion, adding an information panel under abortion-related videos, and directing viewers to credible sources in searches. This is a positive step toward recognizing that disinformation about abortion is not just political speech, but rather medical disinformation that leads to real-world harms—just like disinformation about vaccines, COVID-19, and other health concerns. Moving forward, YouTube must make good on its promise to enforce this policy. However, the platform should also recognize the harm that its broader problem with inflammatory political content has on reproductive freedom and other core rights.

The vast community of far-right actors on YouTube and their dangerous political messages pose a material threat to people's fundamental freedoms and safety. YouTube's current profit model lends itself to extremism, including the ideologies that inspire anti-choice political violence, which has been a major concern in the wake of the *Jackson Women's Health* ruling.

Moreover, anti-choice activists have worked tirelessly to downplay the consequences of overturning *Roe* and lie about their agenda to ban all abortion. YouTube platforming content designed to mislead voters about the extremism of the far-right and their anti-choice agenda could contribute to dire consequences in the absence of federal protections for abortion care and in the midterm elections—especially as Republican politicians plan to enact a national abortion ban if they gain majorities in the midterms. YouTube must recognize its civic responsibility to empower voters with accurate information and take accountability for its role in promoting radical white, patriarchal, and anti-choice ideologies to vulnerable viewers.

Disinformation about abortion care aids the anti-choice movement in its efforts to rob people of the freedom to make the best decisions for themselves and their families by coercing people out of seeking abortion care and promoting cruel and draconian abortion bans. YouTube and other social media platforms must recognize their role in spreading this information and be proactive in promoting accurate, unbiased information.