

# **”We Don’t Talk Anymore”**

**A thematic comparison between Reddit’s ChangeMyView and  
polarized online spaces**

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The Internet is a double-edged sword. It heralds an era of accessible information, while amplifying echo chambers. Reddit's r/ChangeMyView is an online space intended to facilitate discourse on divisive perspectives. Prior research on r/ChangeMyView explores the dynamics of persuasive argumentation. I propose to study the underlying content and contrast it to divisive spaces on Reddit. First, how do topics on r/ChangeMyView differ from ideologically inclined subreddits? When is a topic polarised to an extent that discussion halts? Second, what are the socio-demographic characteristics of participants? What can we infer on who may be more open for discourse?

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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# Chapter 2

## Literature Review

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### 2.1 Homophily: Birds of a Feather *surf* Together

The observation that '*similarity begets friendship*' dates back (at least) to Plato's *Phaedrus*. Modern social scientists conceptualized this phenomena as homophily: people form faster and stronger connections with those of similar socio-demographic characteristics (McPherson et al. 2001).

The strongest dimensions of similarity are race and ethnicity, and the relationships can be both personal (marriage, friendship) and professional (mentorship) .

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Consequently, as described by McPherson et al., our social worlds are 'limited in a way that has powerful implications for the information we receive, the attitudes we form, and the interactions we experience'.

The Information Age saw many facets of human life move online in the past decade. Academics have long been divided on whether this 'virtual migration' broadens or lessens the implications of homophily.

Some academics argue that online spaces mirror 'real-world' homophily through echo chambers and filter bubbles (algorithmic manipulation of exposure).

Numerous studies explore homophily in different online spaces: Facebook (Bakshy et al., 2015), Twitter (Himmelboim et al., 2013; Colleoni et al, 2014; Bright, 2018) and Flickr (Aiello et al., 2012). Common findings can be summarized as: (a) online social ties tend to be homogenous, (b) homogeneity increases with extreme ideologies, (c) the majority of political discussion take place within ideological lines, (d) the presence of heterogenous ties do not indicate cross-cutting discussion.

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In contrast, Barnidge (2017) and, Dubois and Blank (2018) argue that homophily is less pronounced in online spaces: as (a) social media users report higher exposure to political dissent compared to non-users, and (b) high-choice online media enable more exposure than traditional media.

## 2.2 Political Polarization

- What is political polarization? - How has it been studied?

It is interesting to note that while the former argue in terms of user exposure, the latter argue in terms of media exposure.

This narrative can be explained by how online spaces are structured. Online spaces such as Facebook were created with the motive of connecting known users together. Twitter - while enabling anonymity is very much user centric.

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## 2.3 r/ChangeMyView: Talking to *Them*

Reddit, the self-described ‘front page of the internet’, ranks as the 18 most popular website in the world as of December 2020 (Facebook 7, Twitter 46)<sup>1</sup>.

In contrast to the user-centric schematic structure of Facebook and Twitter, Reddit (Figure 1) revolves around self-organized communities (subreddits) of thematic interest (Medvedev et al, 2019). While this structure is not unique to Reddit (e.g., Digg, StumbleUpon), it is by far the most popular.

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## 2.4 Methods

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# Bibliography

McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L. & Cook, J. (2001), *Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks*, Vol. 27 of *Annual Review of Sociology*.