

Kim Hancock  
Reading Response 3

### Social Media and Polarization?

Social networks have facilitated the spread of political information (and misinformation). Rather than being a radical restructuring of how people get their news, social media has exacerbated the trend inherent in human nature to trust information from one's friends more than larger entities like random advertisements. In other words, I am more likely to believe an article if my friend shares it on Facebook than if I stumble across it on my own. With regard to voter turnout, chapter 8 in the textbook cites a study of 61 million people on Facebook in which it was found that users who saw that their friends had voted were more likely to vote themselves.

In many ways, social media upends the norms of objectivity in news media that have been established over the last century. With an "increasingly diverse media landscape," the internet has provided smaller blogs and journals to take a more partisan lean and cater to smaller audiences (Campaigns and Elections pg 227). While horse race coverage remains a prominent topic in all forms of news coverage, including social media and the internet, interpretive journalism is also emerging across these online networks. This interpretive journalism across social media platforms is what I am most interested--how do ideas spread over Facebook and Whatsapp groups? How can we determine when these ideas are misinformation, hate speech, or even conspiracy theories? More than cable news or daily newspapers, my personal opinion is that among younger adults, social media has the most potential out of any news outlet to actually change one's opinion on politics.

There are numerous concerns with the rise of social media as a primary news source. Pew Research Center conducted a study through several surveys in 2020 analyzing the news sources of US adults. They found that 18% of adults (and 48% of adults age 18-29) listed social media as

their primary source of news. More surprisingly, based on a series of 9 different questions testing basic political knowledge, those who use social media as a primary news source were more likely to be less aware and knowledgeable on political matters. They also were more likely to believe conspiracy theories, such as that “powerful people intentionally planned the COVID-19 pandemic” (Pew Research Center). With regard to the election, this group was more likely to lack knowledge about the positions of candidates and major political story lines.

Following this line of analysis, one big question that researchers try to answer is whether or not social media fuels political polarization among those who use it as a primary source of political news. Pew Research Center and other research institutions have collected evidence that polarization in general is increasing; however, social media’s role in this is more murky. There have been many studies analyzing social media “echo chambers”--the idea that online users tend to select information adhering to their system of beliefs and ignore information that does not. Pew Research, Cornell University, and the ACM digital library are just a few of many institutions that have published research supporting the idea that people stick to online communities that conform to their existing beliefs. Theories about “filter bubbles” have also been proposed, stating that social media companies put people in an algorithmically constructed bubble (just look at Tik Tok!). Yet, there are counter arguments to this idea as well. University of Oxford, for example, conducted a study where an online survey was sent out to 2000 adults to examine the media habits of individuals (Dubois). They found that echo chambers were more rare than many hypotheses purport, and that most people have multiple news sources. Still, more research is needed, which is difficult given that it is hard to track echo chambers, especially when they are in closed facebook groups or end-to-end encrypted WhatsApp groups (Dubois).

While it is a bit of an extrapolation from the conversation about US political polarization via social media, I want to end this response by bringing up some of the work I've done analyzing facebook networks for my honors project in computer science. After ethnographically tracking numerous facebook groups over the course of a few months and then writing code to perform a social network analysis, I have so far found that biased political opinions are often spread by a few super-sharers or "gatekeepers" across many groups. What makes this even more difficult is that the opinions that are spread are not wrong per-se, but rather stretch the truth towards a particular partisan lean. I have also found that this is most common in Indian political Facebook groups, as it is more difficult for American fact-checkers to understand the context. In other words, the people doing fact-checking do not have enough knowledge about Indian politics to be able to catch exaggerated or fake news. For example, I spent a lot of time while I was abroad in India tracking Facebook groups; many were talking about the controversial citizen amendment act (CAA) passed in December 2019 which prevents Muslim immigrants from gaining citizenship, but granting it to other ethnic groups. There was a lot of incendiary speech and misinformation, but none of it was being fact-checked! I won't go on too much of a tangent here, but the moral of the story is that actually tracking how polarized news spread is a much bigger undertaking than discussing whether or not it happens in the first place (it does..).

I do believe that social media can be a positive source of news that major outlets may not cover. For instance, Tik Toks went viral this summer during the height of Black Lives Matter protests that showed police brutality that otherwise likely would have gone undocumented. People started posting infographics with resources to learn about racial discrimination. Not all of it was without bias, but nonetheless social media became a platform for resources and news that you would not be able to find elsewhere.

Sources:

- Elizabeth Dubois & Grant Blank (2018) The echo chamber is overstated: the moderating effect of political interest and diverse media, *Information, Communication & Society*, 21:5, 729-745, DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428656](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428656)
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- Campaigns and Elections chapter 8
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