

Mainstream media and political polarisation: A Review of the Literature

Paralleling the ubiquity of mainstream media is their profound effects on the current political terrain. Surveys have found that social media is now among the most common pathways where young people get their political and election news (Mitchell et al., 2020). This shift towards online news platforms provides those previously excluded from the political discourse in authoritarian regimes an opportunity to voice their opinions through the democratisation of access to information (Tucker et al., 2017), as well as changes society's narratives about a future with more egalitarian ways of meeting and discussing due to disintermediation (Törnberg, 2018). However, an increasing number of studies have found adverse effects of extensive social media usage on political attitudes and polarisation (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Beaufort, 2018; Yarchi et al., 2020), which reignites the debate on the impact of selective exposure on one's political viewpoint and the subsequent polarisation of those involved in politics on a wide scale (Iyengar et al., 2019). The primary purpose of this review is to examine the scholarly literature on the relationship between media consumption and political polarisation. It will first lay out the examination of evidence concerning the existence or lack thereof of polarisation directly caused by increased media usage for political research. Accompanying this discussion are brief implications for policy makers, educators, and media consumers on how to respond to the growth in polarisation across the political landscape.

Echo chambers and the spread of misinformation: Drivers of political polarisation

Due to the increasing availability of niche and opinionated news programmes such as the Internet and ideological cable developing more entrenched political positions, great fear has been sparked with regards to segregation by interest exacerbating the gap between those who are politically informed and those who are not. Subsequently, this widening gap is found to increase political polarisation which leads to the reinforcement of political divides and threatens democracies by limiting political discussions (Boomgaarden & Prior, 2007; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Ksiazek et al., 2010).

Studies conducted in the US have found that Americans are deeply divided on controversial issues such as immigration, gun control and racial inequality. And of greater prominence in the scope of this paper is the fact that in recent years, the divisions regarding such issues are observed to have become increasingly aligned with partisan identities (Levendusky, 2009; Mason, 2018). Researchers often attribute America's extensive partisan divides to a concept termed 'echo chambers' (Sunstein, 2001; Berry & Sobieraj, 2013; Prior, 2013; Bakshy et al., 2015; King et al., 2017).

In the context of politics and news media, Jamieson & Capella (2010) defines the problematised phenomenon of an 'echo chamber' as "a bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal" (Jamieson & Capella, 2010). The magnification of hyper-partisan news is typically considered to be a preponderance of "attitude-consistent information" (e.g., left-wing media consumers constantly seeking out information that supports their viewpoint) whereas the insulation against rebuttal is due to the "absence of cross-cutting exposure" (e.g., people on the right refusing to be exposed to centrist or left-wing perspectives that contradicts their pre-existing assumptions and beliefs) (Jamieson & Capella, 2010).

In other words, the extent to which the rise of social media as a dominant force in news distribution has led to the incurrence of greater isolation from diverse perspectives as users' political outlook is isolated in echo chambers - information environments dominated by like-minded people. The proliferation of mainstream media platforms in recent decades, such as the spark in popularity of social

media and the emergence of online news outlets as the main source of political information have undoubtedly caused a significant expansion of selective exposure to biased content (Garrett et al., 2014). Recently researchers have examined the parallels between polarisation and consumed news content, in which increasingly personalised and fragmented news, characterised by “the proliferation of more partisan-oriented media and by a more prominent tendency towards selective news exposure on the side of the audience” has been reported (Bennett & Iyengar 2008; Stroud 2010).

Dubois & Blank (2018) suggest that this significant change in the dynamic interplay between news media environments and politics can lead to segregation based on interest, potentially resulting in an unintended exercise of confirmation bias (Dubois & Blank, 2018). As echo chambers “limit exposure to diverse perspectives” and “favour and reinforce presupposed narratives and ideologies” (Cinelli et al., 2021), research has shown that echo chambers have the potential to become a serious threat to democracy by increasing extremism, social and political polarisation (Barberá et al., 2015; Mickey et al., 2017; Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2021).

Facilitating the negative influence of echo chambers on the changing conceptions of democracy and media usage behaviour is the viral spread of digital misinformation. Even though propaganda has always been deeply entrenched in the political discourse, the deep and wide-ranging repercussions of these false campaigns have provoked critical public interest concerns in recent decades (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). As those participating in echo chambers continually form groups and resist information that does not conform to their beliefs, they create a favourable condition for the growth of misinformation on the Internet (Quattrocio et al., 2016).

Researchers at the University of Oxford have found that the number of countries using social media as a platform for their political disinformation campaigns has doubled in the past two years, with evidence of at least “one political party or government entity in each of those countries engaging in social media manipulation” (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). A number of studies have demonstrated that the partisan divisions emerging from the amplification of misinformation not only impede compromise in the design and implementation of social policies but also have far-reaching and undermining consequences for the effective function of democracy on a broader scale (Erikson et al., 1993; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Fishkin, 2009; Achen et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2018).

Conflicting results in research on political polarisation

Despite the fact that there has been a significant number of studies reporting an increasing trend of political polarisation in digitally mediated environments (e.g. Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2020; McCoy et al., 2018; Grumbach, 2018; Layman et al., 2006; Hare & Poole, 2014), research into partisanship and political polarisation has surfaced conflicting results. This can be partly due to the multifaceted, complex and interconnected nature of social media, characterised by “complexity, non-linearity and emergence” - elements that reaffirm the difficulties involved in the disentanglement of the relationship between media and politics (Törnberg, 2018).

According to research conducted by Tóth et al. (2022), while there is correlation between one's news consumption and their electoral preferences, the evidence shows that this does not necessarily equate to the conclusion that people are insulating themselves from news outlets with opposing viewpoints. The data collected indicates that electoral preferences are in some cases correlated with more diverse media repertoires – i.e., individuals that identify as leaning towards one ideological end of the political spectrum also include counter-attitudinal sources in their news consumption ritual. (Tóth et al., 2022). Previous studies (e.g., Flaxman et al. 2016) showed alignment with this finding which expressed a link between increased exposure to ideologically diverse views and greater ideological distance.

Dubois & Blank (2018) challenge the impact of echo chambers and temper fears of partisan segregation by putting forth an argument that there are limitations in “single media studies and studies which use narrow definitions and measurements of being in an echo chamber” because they fail to take into account the realistic context of multimedia environments (Dubois & Blank, 2018).

Other studies suggest that the evidence for selective exposure in traditional theories being the direct cause of political polarisation lacks conclusivity and consistency, especially given the high-choice information environment in the contemporary world. A number of studies examining patterns of selective exposure in an online environment found no link between exposure to partisan news and the polarisation among voters (e.g., Wojcieszak et al. 2021). Tóth et al. (2022) also puts forth the notion that the extent of selective exposure in previous work on polarisation (cf Garrett 2013) lacks certainty and is often exaggerated rather than investigated empirically (Tóth et al. 2022).

Conclusion: The ways forward in a polarised world

The transition into a more digitised world of communication has posed significant challenges, specifically the exacerbation of political polarisation due to echo chambers and the spread of misinformation. However, due to the complexities arising from the 21st century multimedia environments, clarifying the causal relationship between increasing media usage for political research and aggravated ideological isolation has proven to be a challenging task as evidenced in the multitude of conflicting scientific results.

Political polarisation is a challenge likely to continue affecting society for the foreseeable future. However, studies have shown these challenges can be mediated through the collaboration and actions undertaken by those involved in the online political discourse, including online news consumers, policy makers and educators.

Firstly, an improved understanding of the sources of polarisation and the mechanisms that exacerbate it is indispensable to the process of healing deep political divisions. Rigorous academic research into the ways media can aggravate or hinder political polarisation needs to be continued and ensured to consider the changing dynamics of the 21st century.

Secondly, from a media consumer's standpoint, having a diverse media diet is a pivotal step towards addressing partisan bias. As suggested in research by Dubois & Blank (2018), the higher the number of media types chosen by an individual to be incorporated into their habits, the lower their likelihood of getting caught in an echo chamber. Therefore, individuals are strongly encouraged to approach political news from diverse perspectives, with practical steps including transitioning from passively encountering information with opposing viewpoints, to actively reading multiple sources or using other types of media for information verification (Dubois & Blank, 2018).

Thirdly, future attempts to reduce political polarisation on social media will most likely require policy makers and educators to actively and effectively foster media literacy. As aforementioned, scientific research indicates that individuals with greater media diversity are better at avoiding echo chambers (Dubois & Blank, 2018). Therefore, by suggesting that media users should not rely on social media as the sole source of political news, these media literacy campaigns can help people learn to avoid echo chambers. Higher media literacy would serve efforts in shedding light on ways in which society might combat echo chambers that exist for the relatively small proportion of individuals who neither engage in a variety of news sources nor are interested in politics.

It is an indisputable truth that mainstream media is not going anywhere and, at least for the near future, neither is polarisation. Understanding this politically consequential course of development is proven to be an indispensable part of addressing the global political divide.

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