

The Inherent Polarization of the Internet

Imagine that you are in a room big enough to hold the entire world. You do not all speak the same language and you definitely do not all look alike. Everyone has different cultural and personal backgrounds. Because one's background is part of their identity, imagine that everyone who came from poor living conditions is wearing a blue lanyard with their name written on the tag. In a similar manner, people who came from better living conditions wear a red lanyard. There are people in the middle of the spectrum wearing various shades of purple. Besides this small difference around the neck, everyone is wearing a simple shirt and neutral pants and shoes.

What happens next?

Things are going to start changing as soon as a handful of people in the room get their bearings. The "take-charge" types immediately start calling out to those around them. Conversation is initiated. The room quickly grows loud. Voices become audible rallying-points and you don't yet know which voice to follow after. To be honest, you can scarcely tell them apart.

This room is the Internet, and human nature is evident in every action taken. However, the process of gathering based on shared interests and excluding based on mutual incompatibility is where polarization begins.

People are naturally drawn to those with whom they share similarities with through a process known to psychologists as "affiliation." According to Dr. Bruce D. Perry, affiliation is the capacity to join and work with others in groups. "'This strength,' he states, 'springs from our abilities to form attachments and self-regulate... [it] is the glue for healthy human functioning' (Perry 21). Affiliation isn't hard for us to justify on behalf of our primitive ancestors. If a large assortment of individuals must find ways to survive without the use of any outside aid, then they would likely group by their abilities and work from there. Hunters would be comfortable around other hunters, gatherers with gatherers, and those who were able to use ingenuity would feel at home among like-minded individuals.

Affiliation makes learning quicker and more efficient for the community as a whole by expediting the process of collective learning. Psychologists and historians alike are fascinated by this phenomena that is demonstrated through the ability to communicate ideas effectively in order to solve new problems. Brian Arthur illustrates this concept in terms of human technology in his book *Nature of Technology: What It is and How It Evolves*. In his theory, he makes the claim “...every novel technology is created from existing ones, and therefore that every technology stands upon a pyramid of others that made it possible in a succession that goes back to the earliest phenomena that humans captured” (Arthur 25). By contributing in circles of similar people, humans can take full advantage of collective learning. After all, it is easier to build a theoretical pyramid when the foundational blocks are closer together rather than further apart.

Aside from the primitive advantages of associating with people with a similar skill-set, there are also the social advantages. By forming a community around a specific identity, people create something that is both figuratively and literally bigger than themselves. They create something larger that is more difficult to attack from the outside. Through uniting with a group, individuals can take comfort in the fact that there is safety in numbers.

Returning to our experiment, groups begin to form and new ideas are shared between members. This is a messy process that does not result in perfectly formed collections of individuals. Instead, it changes rapidly over time. In general, however, people with similar backgrounds (still marked with the colored lanyard) generally move together because, as Keith Hart states, “People bring their offline circumstances to behavior online” (Hart 1). Language barriers also divide people, but translators and bilinguals are more and more common in an interconnected world. As relationships are built or fall apart, individuals may leave communities in order to start their own.

As is the case in any time period, people look to others in order to both represent their opinions and relay what's going on at the time. These people take the form of speakers, writers, politicians,

reporters, and celebrities. On the Internet, they can take the form of the aforementioned groups or they can take the form of media creators, curators, and profiles. Regardless of what “type” of relater they are or what medium they use to present their messages, they still hold social significance in a population due to their role as an organizer and influencer.

At this time, it's important to recognize that no single person or group is able to speak on behalf of everyone else. In addition, if it were possible to listen to absolutely everything that is being said in the room, then one would have to move from place to place and group to group infinitely fast. This is simply because there is a vast amount of conversation occurring at any given moment. Every individual must choose what to listen to... and as a result they must also be responsible what group they find themselves in.

The "take-charge" people who influence others and gather like-minded individuals all relay information with slight bias according to their personal preferences concerning what they themselves choose to hear. Whether this is intentional or otherwise, it is normal. As a result, groups who focus on a specific influencer begin to reflect their ideals over time..

Salganik et al proved this theory of the “Social Cascade Effect” that happens when followers of a specific person or idea become conditioned to make decisions based on the continued influence of others. They claim that there are two basic mechanisms that drive the social cascade effect: social learning and social coordination (Bond 42). “The world is too complicated for each individual to solve problems on their own, so we rely on the information that is encoded in our social environment—we assume other people know things we don’t” (Salganik et al. 854). They conclude by explaining that social coordination hinges on the belief that community is better than quality when making decisions in a group. “Liking the same song, movies, sports and books not only gives us something to talk about, but makes us feel like we’re part of something larger than ourselves” (854). People with a strong desire for belonging will be drawn to ideas that will likely be supported by others in the given environment.

In addition to the previous descriptions of social influences on behavior, Cass Sunstein pointed to another cause of polarization in groups: “limited argument pools and the directions in which those limited pools lead group members” (Sunstein 2). The Internet inherently limits argument pools because its vastness dissuades users from actively seeking opposing views. Not only does the sheer size of the world’s online data affect decision-making, the constant search for popular content alters the direction that the already-limited pools are leading

You can see this form of polarization-by-popularity take place in journalism and Internet commentary in real time. Public spaces on the Internet will often show the level of interest that a certain topic has (i.e.: “trending”). Websites and applications monitor the level of input that they receive from their user-base and sort the input based on what type of words or phrases are used. As a result, the more people use a certain keyword, the wider the potential audience for the keyword becomes.

The negative side of trending media can intimidate content creators as a massive audience invites a greater chance of backlash. Joel Stein, a columnist for Time Magazine, polled his peers as part of his research. The results showed that 53% of his peers had been targeted by hate-speech after publishing their work (Gibbs 6). The stunning amount of backlash witnessed by these journalists can be attributed to a behavior known as “risky shift,” or “the tendency of groups to make a collective decision that is less conservative than the members might make as individuals” (Ryan 1). Fueled by both the current mood of the group that they are a part of as well as the partial anonymity that the Internet provides, individuals are more likely to engage in hateful behavior when they encounter messages that they do not agree with.

This alarmingly common situation reflects the dual importance of direct information and clear communication between many different groups of people. If the situation is to be understood properly, then it needs to be in the interest of the public to involve as many credible sources and opinions as

possible. Thus, the responsibility to maintain a healthy online environment falls to Internet users as they must use their own personal judgments when consuming media. By consuming a variety of different media and sharing insightful comments that contribute to discussions rather than attempt to end them, Internet users are able to create a more accurate view of reality.

In conclusion, the Internet and its central goal to allow individuals to communicate more efficiently makes it the most influential technology of history. It is as if the world has been brought together into a single room without barriers between any groups of people. In order to maintain the freedom that this new form of technology offers, Internet users must be able to recognize personal bias—including bias in both themselves and others—and then take strides to ensure that they are receiving information from many sources rather than just a few. Through these steps, Internet users will be able to see current events as part of a bigger picture and avoid the pitfalls that intentional or unintentional isolation brings.

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