Changing Meta's algorithms did not help US political polarization, study finds

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The powerful algorithms used by Facebook and Instagram have increasingly been blamed for amplifying misinformation and political polarization. But a series of groundbreaking studies published on Thursday suggest addressing these challenges will require more than just tweaking the platforms' software. The four research papers, published in Science and Nature also reveal the extent of political echo chambers on Facebook, where conservatives and liberals rely on divergent sources of information, interact with opposing groups and consume distinctly different amounts of misinformation. With cooperation from Meta, the researchers behind the studies analyzed data from millions of users of Facebook and Instagram related to the 2020 US presidential election, and surveyed specific users who agreed to participate. One area of investigation centered around the social media feeds' algorithms, and how they affect voters' attitudes and behavior. The algorithms suggest content for users by making assumptions based on the groups, friends, topics and headlines a user has clicked on in the past. While they excel at keeping users engaged, algorithms have been criticized for amplifying misinformation and ideological content that has worsened political divisions in the US. Proposals to regulate these systems are among the most discussed ideas for addressing social media's role in spreading misinformation and encouraging polarization. But when the researchers changed the algorithms for some users during the 2020 election, they saw little difference. "We find that algorithms are extremely influential in people's on-platform experiences and there is significant ideological segregation in political news exposure," said Talia Jomini Stroud, the director of the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin and one of the leaders of the studies. "We also find that popular proposals to change social media algorithms did not sway political attitudes." When the researchers replaced the algorithm with a simple chronological listing of posts from friends – an option Facebook recently made available to users – it had no measurable impact on polarization. When they turned off Facebook's reshare option, which allows users to quickly share viral posts, users saw significantly less news from untrustworthy sources and less political news overall, but there were no significant changes to their political attitudes. Likewise, reducing the content that Facebook users get from accounts with the same ideological alignment had no significant effect on polarization, susceptibility to misinformation or extremist views. Together, the findings suggest that Facebook users seek out content that aligns with their views and that the algorithms help by "making it easier for people to do what they're inclined to do," according to David Lazer, a Northeastern University professor who worked on all four papers. Eliminating the algorithm altogether drastically reduced the time users spent on either Facebook or Instagram while increasing their time on TikTok, YouTube or other sites, showing just how important these systems are to Meta in the increasingly crowded social media landscape. The work also revealed the extent of the ideological differences of

Facebook users and the different ways that conservatives and liberals use the platform to get news and information about politics. Conservative Facebook users are more likely to consume content that has been labeled misinformation by factcheckers. They also have more sources to choose from. The analysis found that among the websites included in political Facebook posts, far more cater to conservatives than liberals. Overall, 97% of the political news sources on Facebook identified by factcheckers as having spread misinformation were more popular with conservatives than liberals. To conduct the analysis, researchers obtained unprecedented access to Facebook and Instagram data from the 2020 election through a collaboration with Meta, the platforms' owners. The researchers say Meta exerted no control over their findings. The authors of the papers did acknowledge some limitations to their work. While they found that changing Facebook's algorithms had little impact on polarization, they note that the study only covered a few months during the 2020 election, and therefore cannot assess the long-term impact that algorithms have had. They also noted that most people get their news and information from a variety of sources – television, radio, the internet and word-of-mouth – and that those interactions could affect people's opinions, too. Katie Harbath, Facebook's former director of public policy, said the research showed the need for greater research on social media and challenged assumptions about the role social media plays in American democracy. Harbath was not involved in the research. "People want a simple solution and what these studies show is that it's not simple," said Harbath, a fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center and the chief executive of the tech and politics firm Anchor Change. "To me, it reinforces that when it comes to polarization, or people's political beliefs, there's a lot more that goes into this than social media." Meta's president for global affairs, Nick Clegg, argued that the findings showed "there is little evidence that key features of Meta's platforms alone cause harmful 'affective' polarization or has any meaningful impact on key political attitudes, beliefs or behaviors." But the reality is more complicated than that, according to critics who say the findings shouldn't let social media companies off the hook for combating misinformation. "Studies that Meta endorses, which look piecemeal at small sample time periods, shouldn't serve as excuses for allowing lies to spread," Nora Benavidez, a senior counsel at the digital civil rights group Free Press, told the Washington Post. "Social media platforms should be stepping up more in advance of elections, not concocting new schemes to dodge accountability." Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee and whistleblower, was critical of the timing of the research, telling the Post it came after Meta had enacted more aggressive election protection measures to address misinformation leading up to the election. And by the time the experiment began, many users had already joined groups that would have inundated them with questionable content, she said. Lazer, the Northeastern professor, said he was at first skeptical that Meta would give the researchers the access they needed, but was pleasantly surprised. He said the conditions imposed by the company were related to reasonable legal and privacy concerns. More studies from the collaboration will be released in coming months. "There is no study like this," he said of the research published on Thursday. "There's been a lot of rhetoric about this, but in many ways the research has been quite limited."