

Reducing Online Political Polarization in America

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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The Sisyphean Task: Reducing Political Polarization in America

On January 6th, 2021, riots at the Capitol erupted into violence which inflicted lasting physical and mental trauma, as well as the death of five people (Healy, 2021). Twitter permanently suspended Donald Trump's Twitter account, a tool he used to reach his constituents, following the riots (Twitter, 2021). The political landscape of America, since 2016, is defined by the digital interaction between social media companies, fact-checkers, lawmakers, and social media users. Political polarization in America is growing to dangerous levels. How may political polarization among Americans be reduced? Facebook, Twitter, various elected officials, and conspiracy theorists make up the pieces of polarization in America. Fact-checking organizations, such as Ad Fontes Media, NewsGuard, and Politifact, try to resist this polarization. Combating disinformation with continuous intervention, breaking up digital echo chambers and increasing media literacy will decrease political polarization in the United States.

Review of Research

Cognitive, social, and algorithmic biases create the breeding ground for misinformation which further increases political polarization (Ciampaglia & Menczer, 2018). The Pew Research Center found that "62%" of U.S. adults "get news on social media, and 18% do so often" an increase from 2012 where "49% of U.S. adults" retrieved news from social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2020). Del Vicario et al. (2016), using a data-driven model, found that "social homogeneity is the primary driver of content diffusion" and users become clustered which "fosters confirmation bias, segregation, and polarization" (Del Vicario et al., 2016). Social media is an important source of news information, especially Facebook and Twitter, for U.S. adults, but is often fraught with echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce cognitive biases.

Misinformation is spread unintentionally or purposefully through rumours, fiction, vested interests, politicians, or through the media (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Lewandowsky et al. (2012) contend rumours spread on the basis of “emotional arousal” and that politically motivated misinformation is difficult to discern from false or correct information, as well as how the media often “oversimplify, misrepresent, or overdramatize scientific results.” Correcting misinformation is difficult as “retractions rarely, if ever, have the intended effect of eliminating reliance on misinformation, even when people believe, understand, and later remember the retraction” (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Hong and Kim (2016) discovered that “politicians with extreme political ideologies had more Twitter followers than their more moderate peers” and that “information personalization may contribute to heightened levels of extremism.” Social media users called influencers help uphold echo chambers. Soares et al. (2018) when analyzing the political turbulence of Brazil in 2018 identified opinion leaders that “reinforce the group position,” informational influencers who are “drawn into it” and activists that “increase the fragmentation” within social networks.

Social media personalization algorithms increase political polarization because of selective exposure. Customization systems “increase political polarization indirectly, via its effect on political selective exposure” though is “reduced by user-driven customizability” (Dylko et al., 2017). User behavior is consistent and the biggest predictor of news consumption. Flaxman et al. (2016) found that “political interest and ideology are strong direct predictors of selective exposure.” On platforms that may not be content neutral, users with different political leanings were found to select news differently (Flaxman et al., 2016).

Researchers have means of preventing or counteracting echo chambers on social media platforms. Zubiaga et al. (2018) survey multiple approaches to creating rumor classification

systems as a possible way to detect misinformation earlier and address challenges that arise in their implementation. Pennycook and Rand (2018) investigate crowdsourced trustworthiness to reduce the spread of misinformation. Bode and Vraga (2015) suggest that social media can correct misinformation by exposing users through article suggestions and “are confident... this effect is real.” Zollo et al. (2017) found that there was “dominant negativity” in response to “debunking posts” and may fortify biases.

Anti-misinformation features can expose users to diverse sources of information. Such features could extend current scholarship by "gamifying" crowdsourced trustworthiness and diversifying information in the user news feed to infiltrate echo chambers. Fact-checking would also be utilized to differentiate between mainstream sources of news, as systems using crowdsourced trustworthiness scores found that users could not discern trustworthiness as professional fact-checkers could when viewing mainstream media sources (Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

Social Media: A Complex System of Confirmation Bias

Tech Companies and Intervention

Polarization grows as biases become reinforced and exploited on social media platforms. Social media platforms have a responsibility to intervene against the spread of misinformation. Facebook reaches “67% of U.S. adults” with “44% of the general population” getting news through the platform (Gottfried & Shearer, 2020). That is a significant portion of the U.S. population receiving news from social media. Facebook and Twitter both have methods of combating misinformation. Facebook utilizes “third-party fact-checking organizations” that are “non-partisan.” Facebook’s programs have several aspects such as “identifying false news,”

“reviewing content,” “clearly labeling misinformation, and informing users about it,” “ensuring that fewer people see misinformation,” and “taking action against repeat offenders.” Twitter implemented a “community-based approach to misinformation” called Birdwatch that “allows people to identify information in Tweets they believe is misleading and write notes that provide informative context” (Coleman, 2021).

Other companies are not as forthcoming with their methods of intervention. Parler actively does not implement any fact-checking or anti-misinformation techniques. Parler's (2021) community guidelines actively encourage users to “curate” their feeds giving users “the tools... to do it yourself.” Parler’s key goals are to allow users to “curate and moderate your own feed” and the “tools ... to do your own ‘shadow-banning’.” Well-known hubs of alt-right conservatism such as Parler stress user moderation which disregards existing research on confirmation bias and echo chambers.

Current labeling methods are not effective enough at preventing the spread of misinformation or the online growth of political polarization. Though Lewandowsky et al. (2012) state that preexposure warnings can be useful to prevent reinforcement of myth recall, other methods are needed to continually reinforce fact over myth. Twitter implemented labeling but expressed that they were “open to adjusting” which they eventually did over the year through their implementation of a strike system in response to COVID-19 misinformation (Roth & Pickles, 2020). In addition to labeling misinformation, Facebook filters posts labeled as “False, Altered or Partly False” lower in a user’s News Feed along with penalizing repeat offenders by “having their distribution reduced... ability to monetize and advertise removed, and their ability to register as a news Page removed for a given time period.” The increase of political polarization parallels the increasing COVID-19 vaccine mistrust spread online through

misinformation. Twitter Safety (2021) over the course of the pandemic implemented “machine-learning and automated language processing” which “takes time to be effective,” however; the absence of a label may incorrectly be interpreted as accurate when it may not be.

Conspiracy Theorists and Political Extremism

Users moving to other applications for highly personalized content further isolate them from diverse opinions and fortify existing echo chambers. Gab (2020) stresses its political focus stating that it is an “instance of Gab.com” where “political speech protected by the First Amendment is welcome.” Gab (2020) describes itself as a platform to “champion free speech, individual liberty and the free flow of information online.” When filtering by Top Posts of This Year of 2021, the first three posts are by the Gab account @realdonaldtrump. Trump (2021a) posts “to all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January 20th” with over 118k likes. The first post by a different individual than Donald Trump is Mike Lindell, the MyPillow CEO, with the caption “Absolute Proof”, and a video link where he states “they brought me... a piece of evidence that 100% proved... what happened inside the machine of the timestamp that showed another country... attacking us, hacking our election through these machines and showed the votes flipped” with 529.16k recorded views and 69,034 likes (Lindell, 2021). The next person featured is Andrew Torba, the CEO of Gab, welcoming users to the platform in a video where he says “welcome to the home of free speech online” (Torba, 2021a). The description of Andrew Torba’s welcome video states that the video not only “welcomes all of the new community members” but also “exposes the New York Times’ lies about Gab” (Torba, 2021a). Users within the circle of interaction of Torba’s welcome post are already polarized and may be more susceptible to confirmation bias.

When sorting Top Posts on Gab to the month of March in 2021, Donald Trump is again the first post. His post reads “I hope everyone remembers when they’re getting the COVID-19 (often referred to as the China Virus) Vaccine, that if I wasn’t President, you wouldn’t be getting that beautiful ‘shot’ for 5 years, at best, and probably wouldn’t be getting it at all. I hope everyone remembers!” (Trump, 2021b). The fourth post listed is another tweet by Andrew Torba (2021b) stating the “level of attack we are under right now in this spiritual war has never been greater. We are facing media smears, literal demon hackers, banks banning us, and now the Governor of Texas for some reason smearing our community of millions of people” and asks for support “to fight off these attacks.” The conservative leaning of Gab is apparent and indicates the lack of exposure to diverse opinions on the application. Users who follow the opinions of big influencers on Gab are isolated from other opinions and fortify their biases.

Conspiracy theories are the gateway to political extremism and polarization, and social media can enhance the spread of conspiracy narratives. In December 2019, the Pew Research Center (2020) reported that “mentions of ‘QAnon’ were concentrated in a very small number of the most viewed news channels” and “11 of these channels studied produced 80% of the videos mentioning QAnon.” QAnon conspiracy theories are largely produced by a small number of people whose talking points get spread and echoed among followers of conspiracy theories. Alex Jones, a notorious conspiracy theorist, has a website with a Good News section. The first three headlines include the following: “Good News: Bill Gates’ Geoengineering Plot To Block The Sun Is Scrapped...” by Steve Watson, “Watch: Cop Rescues Unconscious Man From Burning Car” by Dan Lyman, and “God Bless The USA: Delivery Driver Neatly Folds, Salutes Fallen Flag” by Infowars.com. Brean and Hawkins (2018) reported on an incident in Arizona where Matthew Wright used “an armored vehicle to block traffic on the bridge near Hoover Dam” and

had “written letters from jail to President Donald Trump... bearing the motto of a right-wing conspiracy group known as QAnon.” Matthew Wright reportedly “called himself a ‘humble Patriot’” and mentioned “the ‘Great Awakening’” (Brean & Hawkins, 2018). Conspiracy theorists become politically radicalized in right-wing echo chambers emphasizing nationalistic values. Personalized platforms that cater to political beliefs do not sufficiently expose users to different sources of information and can result in users taking violent action.

Lawmaker Influence on Digital Forums

Lawmakers benefit by using emotionally evocative language to increase attention and follower interaction which exacerbates political polarization of users who follow these lawmakers. Before the Capitol riots, Trump tweeted multiple times referencing the election and claiming that it had been stolen or fraudulent. Trump evoked strong emotions from users who may have been part of groups such as Stop The Steal or others claiming that the election was rigged. He posted the following tweets the day before the riots: “I hope the Democrats, and even more importantly, the weak and ineffective RINO section of the Republican Party, are looking at the thousands of people pouring into D.C. They won’t stand for a landslide election victory to be stolen. @senatemajldr @JohnCornyn @SenJohnThune”, “Washington is being inundated with people who don’t want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats... MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”, and “looks like they are setting up a big ‘voter dump’ against the Republican candidates. Waiting to see how many votes they need?” (Brown, 2016). On January 6th, 2021, the day Capitol riots started, Trump tweeted “they just happened to find 50,000 ballots late last night. The USA is embarrassed by fools. Our Election Process is worse than that of third world countries!” (Brown, 2016). Though now deleted, Trump expressed that the Capitol riots were understandable as “these are the things and events that

happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!” (Brown, 2016).

Trump used three main tactics to evoke emotion and interaction. Trump continually appealed to divisive sentiments against an “other” group by referencing Democrats and “Radical Left Democrats” as well as “weak and ineffective” parts of the Republican party. Trump also emphasized the “significant” backing he had by using phrases such as “thousands of people pouring” or “inundated with people”. Lastly, he appealed to groups of users already polarized and part of an echo chamber that believed the election was fraudulent. He used words such as “landslide election victory” and “stolen” as well as appealing to his supporters’ righteousness by saying how “they won’t stand” for a fraudulent election that clearly was won by him. Brown (2016) cites a tweet where Trump did attempt to decrease violence by “asking for everyone at the U.S. Capitol to remain peaceful. No violence! Remember, WE are the Party of Law & Order -- respect the Law and our great men and women in Blue. Thank you!” Even when using similar tactics to evoke a sense of justice and righteousness from his followers, this tweet was not effective in reversing the inflammatory nature of what was already established. The tweet that attempted to make peace had a large number of likes, 730k, the largest number of likes on Trump’s tweets from January 6th where numbers are available. The tweet was ineffective in reducing physical violence even with the degree of interaction.

When users of opposing views encounter inflammatory statements, political sentiments become reinforced and further polarize. On April 7th, 2021, Marjorie Taylor Green (2021a) tweeted “.@JoeBiden nor any other has no power to infringe on Americans 2nd Amendment rights. That phrase about ‘security of a free state’ and ‘right of the people to keep and bear arms

shall not be infringed' is there just for times like these. And the people know it" with a picture of the 2nd Amendment written on a paper-like background. One reply with 37 likes underneath reads "you've never read that. I guarantee it" alluding to Greene not reading the Constitution as she was quoting. Greene's Twitter profile reads "Congresswoman for Georgia's 14th CD, Christian, Wife, Mom, Small Business Owner, Proud American, 100% Pro-Life, Pro-Gun, Pro-Trump #MAGA Likes != Endorsements" (Greene, n.d.). Sarah H. Flexghost's bio reads "[Posts: politics, science, tech, nature | #BLM |  | Neuro Divergent | She/Her]" (Flexghost, n.d.). Another reply in the Twitter thread with 15 likes reads "you skipped over 'well regulated,' Large Marj." with a picture of Greene that reads "EXPEL Insurrectionist Seditious Traitor UNFIT TO SERVE Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA)" emulating a campaign advertisement ([middle finger] The GQP, 2021). On [middle finger] The GQP's (n.d.) profile, their bio says " Atheist. Progressive. Patriot. CA-11. They/Them. Genealogy: parents, maternal grandparents, Mitochondria Eve." The profile banner of [middle finger] The GQP is a picture of a truck with a sign that says "TRUMP LOST LOL" and three flags: the U.S. flag, LGBTQ+ flag, and a Black Lives Matter flag.

Diverse users with different political leanings interact on social media platforms, but do not challenge a user's bias. The negative emotions that arise from interacting with content that is extremely different from the point of view of the user enhances bias. Lauren Boebert tweeted "America is NOT a sanctuary country" on April 7th amassing 22.2k likes in response to media conversation on Biden and the border wall (Boebert, 2021). Zullo (2021) quoted Emma Lazarus's sonnet 'The New Colossus' tweeting "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" Borowski (2021) replied

in similar fashion replying “Psst... that is kinda what we are known for Qbert ” with an attached photo of the Statue of Liberty. Frank (2021) tweets in reply “Lauren, when you have a moment:” and a link to a mayoclinic.org website for “Narcissistic Personality Disorder - Symptoms & Causes.”

Fact-Checking Against Misinformation

Vanessa Otero created the Media Bias Chart and founded Ad Fontes Media, a watchdog organization, to effectively combat political polarization. Utilizing the Media Bias Chart to give greater context when informing users of possible misinformation will be effective in decreasing political polarization. Otero started Ad Fontes Media when “alarmed by the unhealthy state of the media ecosystem” and created a chart “to meet the demand for a map to help people navigate the complex media landscape, as well as for comprehensive content analysis of media sources themselves” (Ad Fontes Media, 2021a). Ad Fontes Media (2021a) also provides experts who “are available for consulting, training, and speaking on news source reliability and bias.” Ad Fontes Media (2021b) has a page dedicated to listing the members involved in the creation of the Media Bias Chart with short descriptions of experience that make them experts. Otero in a recent article acknowledges “nuance has to go away when it’s a graphic” and that the chart is “a tool to help people have a shortcut” (Sheridan, 2021). Using only the Media Bias Chart may be detrimental, as Otero states “overreliance on a chart like this is going to probably give some consumers a false level of faith” and brings up she “can think of a massive journalistic failure for just about every organization on this chart. And they didn’t all come clean about it” (Sheridan, 2021). Users can avoid political polarization by utilizing the Media Bias Chart with other anti-misinformation tactics to quickly visualize media bias.

NewsGuard integrates into the browsing experience, adding functionality to labeling by providing accessible details when needed. NewsGuard establishes credibility by stating they have “trained journalists”, visible “credentials and backgrounds of everyone responsible”, an “ethics and conflicts of interest policy”, are “totally transparent” about their decisions, have “concerted attempts to get comment”, “will post any complaints from website proprietors about anything we have written about them”, “accept no fees from news websites we rate”, and bring “information to people about the news sources they encounter online” (NewsGuard, 2020a). By paying for a membership subscription, users get “unlimited access to our browser extension... with news in the U.S., U.K., France, Germany and Italy, rating icons next to linked... on all top search engines, social media platforms, and news aggregation sites, summaries showing who owns each site... and how it performs on nine journalistic criteria, detailed written descriptions of each site and why they passed or failed the nine criteria, warnings on hoax healthcare sites, warnings on political propaganda news sites, warnings on... hoaxes, conspiracy theories, advertising posing as news, and other unreliable sites, a reliability score of 0-100, Misinformation Monitor” newsletter access, and access to its mobile apps (NewsGuard, 2020b). NewsGuard’s functionality is more involved in how users browse media and may be effective in providing accessible context.

PolitiFact rates claims and is similar to Ad Fontes Media in being a separate resource users can reference for context and fact verification. Both Ad Fontes Media and NewsGuard have profit by selling their services while PolitiFact claims to be a “not-for-profit national news organization” (Holan, 2018). PolitiFact selects claims submitted by readers or from “transcripts, speeches, news stories, press releases, and campaign brochures... TV and scan social media” and acknowledges that they “can’t feasibly check all claims” so they “select the most newsworthy

and significant ones” (Holan, 2018). PolitiFact (2021) lists the “organizations that contributed more than 5 percent of total PolitiFact revenues in the previous calendar year” as “Facebook, TikTok.” PolitiFact does make clear, however, that they do “not accept donations from anonymous sources, political parties, elected officials or candidates seeking public office, or any other source with a conflict of interest as determined by PolitiFact’s executive director” (PolitiFact, 2021). Though fact checking organizations can be effective at providing context and expert analysis on news media bias, users should still keep in mind the funding and motivations of these organizations.

Conclusion

By creating unobtrusive recommendation algorithms, crowdsourced trustworthiness, and opportunities to diversify news feeds, an application can effectively decrease political polarization in the U.S. Social media profits and capitalizes on personalized media, a result of the amount of data available, which fortifies confirmation bias. Tech companies have been late to implement preventative measures, and reducing political polarization will be even harder. Political leaders make unverified promises that fortify biases in their constituents. Though companies continually depend on labeling misinformation, it is not enough. By not actively preventing the spread of misinformation, disinformation efforts are more effective at spreading false news without resistance. The complete absence of misinformation is impossible and may even be detrimental, but the tools to identify and correct misinformation are needed to create an environment of accuracy and public discussion. Further work is needed to verify these techniques’ effectiveness, repetitive studies will help determine if they are the solution to increasing political polarization within the U.S. Working against political polarization on social

media is not the only application of these anti-misinformation techniques. The techniques discussed could be applied to many different fields from health and medicine to effective natural disaster reporting.

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