

The Effects of Mass Media on Political Polarization In The United States

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Abstract:

In recent years, political polarization in the United States has been increasing at an alarming rate. Not only are citizens voting with more extreme opinions in their party, but the negative feelings toward the opposing party have increased as well. This can be attributed to a wide variety of reasons, not the least of which is the influence of mass media, such as news media and social media. This paper hopes to demonstrate how mass media has contributed to the increase in political polarization in American society. Results show that the creation of echo chambers, filtering of news feeds, and spread of fake news and partisan media have all contributed to the prevalence of polarization in the United States.

Keywords: political polarization, mass media, echo chamber, fake news, social media

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I. Introduction

In any democracy, differing ideas are commonplace. People's beliefs, ideas, and morals vary, often leading to disagreement. This disagreement is often beneficial, as it paves the way for proper discourse on controversial subjects, bringing the citizens of a democracy closer to a mutual understanding of each other's views and beliefs, though they may not agree. However, disagreement does not always bring people to beneficial discourse, instead, it may cause people to hold stronger opinions against others. This is a phenomenon known as polarization, something that is becoming more and more prevalent in the present-day United States.

Political polarization in the United States has increased drastically over the past 20 years. According to a study performed by Pew Research Center in 2014, "[t]he overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions has doubled over the past two decades from 10% to 21%" (Political Polarization, 2014). The number of people with moderate views and opinions has diminished, with more people moving to the extremes of their views. In addition to this, people have stronger negative views toward the opposite party than they did in the past, with the percentage of Democrats who view Republicans as a "threat to the nation's wellbeing" increasing from 16% to 27% from 1994 to 2014. Likewise, the percentage of Republicans with strongly negative views toward Democrats increased from 17% to 36% (Political Polarization, 2014). This tendency toward negative feelings against the opposing party in politics is known as *affective polarization*. While affective polarization is to be expected in any country, its dramatic increase in the United States recently is a phenomenon that has not been observed in other countries to the same extent. A research study that tracked nine OECD countries over four decades found that the "*US exhibited the largest increase in affective polarization...In three other countries—Canada, New Zealand, and Switzerland—polarization also rose, but to a lesser extent. In five other countries—Australia, Britain, Norway, Sweden, and (West) Germany—polarization fell*" (Boxell, et al., 2021).

In the current age, many have become dependent on mass media—including news media and social media—for information. The spread of news has quickened significantly as a result of this and has allowed people to be informed on a wide variety of subjects, but at the same time, many of the factors contributing to the increase in polarization can be traced back to the consumption of mass media. Although there are many factors that have increased polarization in the United States in recent years, mass media remains a prominent component that gave rise to this, by means such as the creation of echo chambers, filtering news feeds, and the spread of fake news and partisan media.

II. Methodology

To come to this conclusion, the researcher conducted an analysis of secondary data concerning the issues of political polarization and mass media usage. Political shifts in America have been closely documented, especially in recent years, but it has not been clear what has led to these trends. Through the observation of recent trends regarding the use of social media, the researcher formed the hypothesis that social media and political polarization in the US may be correlated.

Through extensive secondary research of the psychological and sociological effect of social media, the researcher found her hypothesis to be accurate, but limiting. Research showed that media in general, not only social media, may be the cause of political polarization in the US. To remedy this, the researcher then changed her hypothesis to encompass mass media in general, thus including outlets such as television, newspapers, and radio.

Using this new framework, the researcher then explored possible reasons for the impact of mass media on political polarization. Through a secondary analysis of research similar to previous methods, she identified three major causes of polarization that stem from mass media, namely, the creation of echo chambers, the filtering of news feeds, and the spread of fabricated media.

III. Results

Social media has become increasingly popular as a way of communication, learning, and expression. The vast majority of people in the United States are active social media users, with 80.9% of the U.S. total population having active accounts (US Social Media, 2022). Providing connections to people across the globe with extremely diverse experiences, media has been proven to be more *“important than interpersonal networks in exposing people to views unlike their own”* (Muntz, et al., 2001). The wide variety of news sources currently available gives people a choice of where they get their information from, who they listen to, and ultimately, what they believe. While this variety of options can be beneficial, *“that exercise of choice may lead to less diversity of political exposure”* (Muntz, et al., 2001). Selective exposure is the tendency for people to consume material that supports their pre-existing views. Because of this, people tend to *“use media outlets that correspond to their ideological beliefs”* (Garrett, 2009). This can create an echo chamber where people only consume media they support and avoid being exposed to different ideas or opinions. When an echo chamber is created, people are no longer able to appreciate the views of another group, causing their beliefs to be more extreme.

Not only can an echo chamber lead to more polarization in social media by limiting opposing views, but the risky shift phenomenon can occur as well. The risky shift phenomenon refers to the tendency in which *“people change their decisions or opinions to become more extreme and riskier when acting as part of a group, compared with acting individually”* (Baumeister et al., 2007). When put in the context of social media, this effect can have extremely unhealthy outcomes. Because social media increases connection and the ability to discuss as a group, individuals on the internet are prone to inadvertently falling into this trap. When discussing a subject with a group of like-minded people, the risky shift phenomenon can cause someone to develop more extreme views, even if the people around them were not strongly opinionated either. Because of this general propensity, it can be dangerous when people only engage in discourse with those who agree with them ideologically. It can lead to more stubbornly held beliefs, making people less likely to listen to others, which increases polarization and decreases mutual understanding.

There seems to be a simple solution to this problem: ensure that the news one consumes is ideologically diverse, and provides a variety of opinions and political beliefs. And while this is possible, it is not easy. Social media is no longer solely a platform for connection, but it has increasingly become an important news source for many people. Sites like YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram are all used for news, but Facebook is by far the most impactful, with *“about a third (36%) of Americans getting news there regularly”* in 2020 (Shearer et al., 2021). Facebook’s Feed feature allows people to conveniently access recent news, and, what is more, a person’s Feed is curated specially for them. The news that is shown to any given person in Facebook’s Feed has been filtered through their algorithm, which gatekeeps information depending on *“friend relationships, explicitly expressed user interests, prior user engagement, implicitly expressed user preferences, post age, platform priorities, page relationships, negatively expressed preferences, and content quality”* (DeVito, 2016). This can deeply affect one’s news intake, as the news presented to them has been affected by their associations and beliefs. The same news story could be presented in very different ways by different media outlets and distributed thus to their target audiences.

Not only are sites such as Facebook filtering the news feed for their users, but many Americans are unaware of this, or are unsure of what other sites have the same feature. Because many media outlets are hesitant to share what their algorithms are and how they work, *“[U.S.] students are largely unaware of whether and how news sources track user data and apply editorial judgments to deliver personalized results”* (Powers, 2017). This can be very dangerous and can bring about much polarization. Since people are not aware that their

news feed is being filtered, they will hold to their beliefs very strongly, thinking they understand every aspect of an event, which would be untrue. These algorithms decrease the variety of opinions that one should have access to with the vastness of social media today and feed into the stubborn tendency to confirm what they already believe and dismiss what they believe to be false.

In addition to using algorithms to filter the news that one may see, recent media technology has brought about the rapid spread of fake news, misleading headlines, and biased partisan media. False news and headlines tend to be more captivating and interesting than true news. Since people are more likely to react to and share shocking news stories, “[f]alsehood diffuse[s] significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information” (Vosoughi, et al., 2018). To take advantage of this propensity, journalists may be prone to fabricating or exaggerating certain news stories to draw in more viewers, thus also gaining higher revenue. While it may seem harmless at first, when looked at from a broader scale, “fake news prevents information aggregation and consensus in the population” (Azzimonti et al., 2018).

Similarly, partisan media often evokes these strong emotions among U.S. citizens, as research has found that the “use of proattitudinal partisan news online is associated with increased anger, but not anxiety, directed at the opposing party’s presidential candidate and that anger subsequently facilitated information sharing about the election on social media” (Hasell et al., 2016). In other words, partisan news tends to be more provocative than impartial news, creating a strong emotional response from readers. This then leads readers to share the story, however biased or fabricated it may be. Not only so, but it also increases anger at the opposing party.

This spread of partisan media separates United States society even more, as some groups may believe the news and others violently reject it. Not only so, but as polarization increases, the spread of fake news increases as well. The more polarized political parties are, people on either side are more motivated to spread news that supports their side or makes their opponent look inferior, regardless of whether the media is true or false. The stronger polarization is, the more fake news will spread, as research finds that “individuals who report hating their political opponents are the most likely to share political fake news and selectively share content that is useful for derogating these opponents” (Osmundsen et al., 2021). Because the spread of fake news increases polarization, and increased polarization, in turn, increases the spread of fake news, a vicious cycle is formed in which people’s ideology becomes very extreme on both ends, and misinformation is nearly impossible to avoid.

IV. Conclusion

While mass media is certainly not the only factor that contributes to the increase in political polarization in the United States, it remains extremely significant as it is the main source from which people obtain information. If users are not cautious, social media can create an echo chamber environment in which people are only exposed to views they already agree with. This can lead them to hold more extreme stances on political views. This can also be contributed to by the filtering of news feeds by various sites limiting the variety of different stories one reads. Finally, the spread of fake news and partisan media in the United States has been seen to increase political polarization, as fabricated or exaggerated stories provoke anger between political parties. All of these things can affect people very deeply, whether they know it or not, creating a large divide in communities. Awareness of how mass media affects one’s information intake is a crucial first step to reducing political polarization in American society.

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