

Shouting To Yourself: Effects of Partisan Politics on Social Media

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Introduction

It is no secret that the state of the United States is in an intense polarized political land. Every news station, every newspaper, and every social media site has been infiltrated with current day politics all leading up to one of the most watched and debated elections in United States history. Many recent studies have focused on the increasing use of social media that candidates use to speak to their base and the ads they pay to target their desired demographics. However, what many of these studies fail to mention is the extreme bias of social media algorithms and the impact that has on a person's political views. The intention of most sites is to produce content that the user has previously liked before and curate what it believes they would like to see. The problem with involving politics is that many users are only seeing ideologies that they already agree with and therefore simply reinforces their already held opinion, even when it is falsified information. The purpose of my research is to gain attention to an understanding of how politics on social media are damaging to opening up the discussion of bipartisan politics. This research will hopefully encourage others to look at how one can change their pages into a broadened political landscape with meaningful discussions, and lessen the divide politics have created on social media.

Literature Review

Although I could not find scholarly articles directly addressing my main concerns of my research, I found many sources whose research and knowledge connect or touch upon the selective exposure social media algorithms can have. In a fascinating study run by Louisiana State University's School of Mass Communication, researchers created custom-made news portals to gauge the way partisan news influences preference, engagement, and reliability. While all participants selected a political affiliation prior, only some participants received a niche

partisan news portal, while others maintained a balance of mainstream news, not meaning to cater to partisanship. For twelve days, participants used the portal however often they pleased, and results showed that regardless of political affiliation, those that saw news that were party-congruent to their preference reported a greater confidence in the portal's ability to aggregate important news (Bryanov, Watson, Pingree, Santia 2020). The concerning issue is made clear that digital intermediaries have the capacity to profoundly affect what content users see, which leads to the possibility of producing homogeneous content leading to intense opinion polarization. A similar survey conducted by Powers, Koliska, and Guha found their participants, of 200 college students taking a general Media Literacy course, agreed in consensus that social media sites have, "these information bubbles [that] create a "hive mindset" and polarize differing opinions, and where there was, it was usually uncivil shouting matches with unattached people, like trolls." (Powers, Koliska, Guha 2019). They showcase the inability to have meaningful conversations about partisanship politics over social media. Through this research I became quite curious about how one even starts to find sensible news about politics on social media, which led me deeper to understanding what fake news even is. In Katherine Fry's, a PhD media literacy professional, *What Do We Mean by Fake? What Do We Mean by News?*, she reveals her position on how news should and has always been looked at under a critical lens. To go farther she states that journalism is a social construction and ever changing within the media landscape, and that it is crucial to understand these form's biases and the cultural environment they create and nurture (Fry 2017). The most important part of her article is making known that we all have participatory roles as aggregators, and it is therefore up to the person to find their own diversity of opinion in order "to do the work to literally construct that truth." (Fry 2017). As one has to become aware of their own information bubbles and biased news, it is also up to the person to

break out of their own patterns on social media. This brought me to an amazing TED Talk done by Theo E. J. Wilson, who after becoming aware of his own liberal news cycle, made his own fake profile to infiltrate the alt-right and white supremacist movement on Facebook in order to try to better understand their cycle of media and how they came to form these opinions. After months of interaction, he reflects to find that one has to “let go of that fear and embrace your curiosity...[that] we have got to break out of these digital divides, because as our technology advances, the consequences of our tribalism become more dangerous.” (Wilson 2017). This experience has led him to create Shop Talk Live, where real people come together in person to have diverse and productive conversations about the most pressing issues of their community. He deeply believes, “these courageous conversations are the way that these bridges are built. It's time that we start seeing people as people and not simply the ideas that we project onto them or react to.” (Wilson 2017). The information that I have found made a profound impact on my research, specifically its ability to clearly implicate media professionals, and even everyday media users' concerns about how social media aggregators feed them their political information. Going further into what false media is and how someone can work towards creating a diverse political landscape on their own pages will help connect my own research into fixing the problems selective exposure can create in regards to politics.

Research Questions

My research questions are clear, does social media help drive polarized political opinions? What are the impacts of these political biases being constantly reinforced? I am determined to use my research in order to prove that politics on social media are what helps divide so many Americans view's, due to the echo chambers online users easily find themselves in. These echo chambers are

what causes selective exposure of information and political lies to seep through into peoples pages' and continue to flourish a person's already believed truths. I plan to connect my research by understanding what the actuality of news is, especially on opinion-based politics. Today there is so much information circulating around the world that it can be extremely difficult to find the truth. However, I believe that finding the truth is not the ultimate answer to how to mend the line drawn from politics. It is important for people to understand that inherently unbiased news no longer exists, but that it is okay to read opinion based news as long as there is awareness. It is only this inability to be aware of biased news and social content that is extremely damaging to understanding each other's political perspectives and can greatly deter a person from becoming informed on the actual reality of the issues at hand. By users taking opinion pieces as factual integrity it diverges any reconciliation of the divided ideals of the American people from happening.

Methods

For my methods of research, my goal is to find a broad pattern of how someone's political opinion has been shaped by the political content that they are given on their social media pages. I am not so much looking for personal opinions of politics, but rather how that opinion shapes someone's political content on social media. The quantitative method will help me decipher any broad patterns as I will receive numerical data to examine. In doing so I collected data on an anonymous 40 participant survey that I created and posted to my own social media pages. The survey consisted of these 5 questions:

1. What is your age?
2. Do you gain most of your political information from social media sites?
3. If yes, what site do you mainly use? Select Below

4. What is your political ideology? Select Below
5. Does the majority of the content you see adhere to your political ideology?

With my own academic research along with my survey results, I am confident that my hypothesis that pre-existing political biases are reinforced through closed online information bubbles will be proven.

Analysis

Through my own research I was able to garner great results that reinforce my argument that social media does help drive polarized political opinions. A majority of my participants were aged within an 18-24 age range, with outliers belonging to 25-34, 45-54, and 55-64. Of these 83% said they gain most of their political information from social media, yet not one social media site was of majority use. Most data regarding what specific media platforms one uses went to Instagram and Twitter, but received a notable amount of response for Facebook, Snapchat, and All of the above. My next question had a majority response of identifying as Liberal with a 78% response, which was expected due to the majority of younger respondents, as young people tend to be more liberal. The last and most important question to my research received an overwhelming response of 85% responding to yes, a majority of the content they see they already agree with politically. With this data I examine many of the participants to be stuck within an echo chamber of their own, leaning to be a liberal one. This dangerous statistic shows that social media content is produced to show the user what they have already previously liked and engage with often. When put into political perspective terms, the way opinion and news comes to users who gain a majority of their information solely from these sites, are open to damaging a person's view of gaining access to differing opinions. This also creates an easier access to false information, as someone who has been primed with congruent opinionated content will be more

likely to believe in the credibility as according to Bryanov, Watson, Pingree, Santia's research using custom-news portals.

Conclusion

It is easy to understand that social media is an economic entity and gains revenue the more users use their pages. In order for these sites to gain more attraction they have special algorithms that curate content specifically to what the user has already liked in hopes that it will keep people engaged for longer. This ideal coupled with the large presence of politics becoming immersed with social media, creates a cautionary reaction to those users slipping into what media researchers have dubbed "echo chambers." It is these echo chambers that cause selective exposure of information and misinformation to appear that continue to flourish a person's already believed truths. Without this inability to see multiple sides to a political event or ideology, the polarization of America's already polarized two-party landscape will only worsen. The internet was made to connect people, but as of now social media's aggregation of content creates a disconnect between people who need to connect the most. Without meaningful discussions, and properly backed information, politics on social media have become a storm of hateful trolls, with little recognition and respect of the other's viewpoints. Anyone who slightly understands politics knows that fair progress is only ever made through bipartisan acts. This dangerous trap of aggregating political content to a user's already believed partisan position pushes a polarized agenda even further. My research only goes so far to understand how political content is pushed to users, and with a base of majority young people the information may have a limited pool of representation. However, I greatly push for further research into this topic, as it could have lasting effects on how Americans view the political landscape, and how we get to reaching compromise and acceptance. Perhaps one could create bots to pertain to political ideologies and

see how their content user pages become shaped over time. Overall, in Theo E.J. Wilson's words, "Human beings all want the same things and we have to go through each other to get these things," showcasing that the only way to get past political turbulence and widespread disagreement is by opening up to one another from a place of curiosity and opening ourselves up to a place of accepting change.

References

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