

Social Media's Effect on Public Opinion and Polarization

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Introduction

When studying how individuals are socialized into the political environment, many factors play a role in affecting and shaping personal beliefs and opinions. Such agents that shape public opinion include parental political beliefs, education, and personal experience. Since such described factors are unique to each individual, family dynamics, educational history, and differing personal experiences tailor individual opinions on issues and party alignment is different. Media, however, is a different force that influences public opinion. Mass media communication allows a person or group of people to shape a large proportion of the population's opinions at one time, but also shapes individuals' perceptions of events and issues differently. While political scientists have historically acknowledged mass media as a major influence of public opinion, in recent years a new medium has arisen that has affected public opinion: social media. Social media, a subset of mass media, has its own effect on shaping opinion by allowing users to voice their opinions and generate information on any topics, regardless of any prior knowledge that a user may have on a given issue. As a result of this unfiltered generation of information and opinion, as well as communication techniques unique to this medium, social media further affects the polarization of public opinion on social media in the American political environment.

Media as an Influencer of Public Opinion

Media has been an influential factor on public opinion for many years. From the publication of newspapers to the invention of television, there have been mass communication sources working to educate and inform readers on current events; while these purposes are generally understood as the main purposes of mass media, media sources also have the ability “to extend our knowledge, our capacities and our imaginations”—and they usually go beyond these

actions to further influence public opinion.¹ For example, some forms of media also give positions on highly opinionated topics in American politics. Mass media affects public opinion by shaping perception “during the emergent and legitimizing phases” of issues in society.² When mass media sources frame issues at this early phase of information analysis, the sources influence how people assess emerging issues. When shaping public perception about an issue, mass media sources act as strategic actors that have “distinct preferences and incentives” regarding what topics they want to cover and how they want to direct individuals to perceive an issue.³ As a result, when studying media and its effect on public opinion, there is no question *if* media can shape public opinion; rather, the question is *how* media will serve as a contributing factor to public opinion.

Mass media has a strong influential effect on public opinion; social media is the newest subset of mass media. According to a 2018 report by GlobalWebIndex, 98% of digital users worldwide use some kind of social media, giving this form of media a strong influence on public opinion.⁴ People use social media to inform other users about current events, while also sharing and posting their opinions on highly discussed topics in the news. While social media shares these similarities with other forms of media, social media also has unique opinion-shaping characteristics. When considering the average person spends over two hours on social media each day, the way that social media can shape public opinion is important to take into

¹ Graham, A. (1998) "Broadcasting policy and the digital revolution." In Seaton, J. (Ed.). (1998). *Politics and the Media: Harlots and Prerogatives at the Turn of the Millennium*. Wiley-Blackwell.

² Hubbard, J., DeFleur, M., & DeFleur, L. (1975). Mass Media Influences on Public Conceptions of Social Problems. *Social Problems*, 23(1), 22-34. doi:10.2307/799625

³ Baum, M. A., & Potter, P. B. (2008). The relationships between mass media, public opinion, and foreign policy: Toward a theoretical synthesis. *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.*, 11, 39-65.

⁴ Bayindir, N. Kavanagh, D (2018). Social: GlobalWebIndex’s flagship report on the latest trends in social media. *GlobalWebIndex*.

consideration when analyzing public opinion.⁵ One characteristic that shapes how social media affects public opinion is the how the volume of news that can spread through social media. Means of communication deemed “traditional sources” of media, such as television and newspapers, have time and space limitations that prevent smaller stories that news writers and editors from adding these stories to television programs or the next issue of the paper. The internet, from which social media derives its capabilities, allows for people to share infinite amounts of news stories and opinions, making news stories that were otherwise seen as too trivial for the press to cover, can be easily shared on social media.⁶ Since media sources can share unlimited stories and opinions on current events through social media, there is a larger amount of information available with which people can form their opinions and even their personal ideologies.

Individuals also interact with social media differently than mass media. In normal media sources, individuals can receive information from the sources, but cannot communicate through the sources that give this information; for example, when a viewer watches a television news program, they receive the information from the newscasters but cannot give their feedback directly back to the newscasters or politicians. This lack of potential feedback via traditional media limits communication between politicians and their constituents.⁷ Traditional media is a one-way communication method; in comparison, social media can be used as a two-way means of communication, since consumers can both receive information from other users and

⁵ Bayindir, N. Kavanagh, D (2018). Social: GlobalWebIndex’s flagship report on the latest trends in social media. *GlobalWebIndex*.

⁶ Pavlik, J. V. (2008). Media in the digital age. *Columbia University Press*.

⁷ Enli, G. S., & Skogerbø, E. (2013). Personalized campaigns in party-centred politics: Twitter and Facebook as arenas for political communication. *Information, Communication & Society*, 16(5), 757-774.

communicate it to other users, which includes not only news but also the users' personal opinion on the given news story. Since users both receive and communicate information on social media, they can connect with others who have similar beliefs; users can even provide each other with information about a certain subject, since these individuals may have information about a topic not covered by mass media sources. Giving anyone the ability to communicate information allows social media to be resourceful and inform others, and gives even "average citizens" the ability to engage in political conversation with others on a larger scale than merely face-to-face communication;⁸ however, this open forum feeling that social media gives to users also gives "tremendous weight and influence" to social media regarding how individuals make political decisions, both in shaping ideology and deciding for whom they cast their votes in elections.⁹

Participants in the Political Conversation on Social Media

When looking at social media as an agent of political subjection, it is important to look at who in particular is attracted to using social media and how these people use social media. A large proportion of the population has social media accounts, but not all users interact the same on social media sites. To distinguish how people use social media, Petter Brandtzaeg separates social media users into five distinct categories:

1. Sporadics. These users visit a social media site infrequently and tend to use the site for informational purposes only, generally not communicating much through their profile. Brandtzaeg found that 19% of his sample of users for his data collection fell into the sporadic category.

⁸ Carpenter C. A. (2010). The obamachine: Technopolitics 2.0. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 7, 216–225.

⁹ Kapko, M (2016). How social media is shaping the 2016 presidential election. CIO.

2. Lurkers. These users, which according to Brandtzaeg's sample population made up the largest user category (27%), use social media more than sporadic users, but tend to use social media to "kill time" and also do not generally participate in conversations or debates on social media.
3. Socializers. This group made up 25% of Brandtzaeg's sample population and represent users who tend to use social media to make "small talk" and converse with other users, yet are not the users who generally participate in debates with other users.
4. Debaters. This group makes up the smallest percentage of Brandtzaeg's sample population, with only 11% falling into this category. This group is made up of social media users who enjoy contributing to or starting discussions on social media.
5. Actives. This group makes up 18% of Brandtzaeg's population and includes users who are active in all aspects of social media, including information gathering, making small talk and engaging in debates.¹⁰

When looking at social media usage in this paper, it is most likely that the bulk of information will come from the debaters and actives, as they most freely participate in debates, which include political discussions; however, since these two categories only accounted for a total of 29% of his population in Brandtzaeg's sample population. While this combined proportion of active users and debaters has most likely increased over the past 12 years, and Norwegian social media activity can differ from American social media activity, one must consider that since these categories together probably still do not make up a majority of the population, no conclusions

¹⁰ Brandtzaeg, P. B., & Heim, J. (2011). A typology of social networking sites users.

International Journal of Web Based Communities, 7(1), 28-51.

The data for this research was collected using an online questionnaire distributed to all users on four Norwegian social media sites in 2007 and had a total of 5,233 respondents.

can be made from research when the relevant data primarily comes from the activity of these two categories of users.

This typology also makes it easier to understand that there are other purposes of social media than political conversation that attract users. Individuals choose to utilize social media for a variety of reasons according to the individual's needs, including information gathering, entertainment, networking, and communicating with friends and family. Some people may feel the need to use social media as a way to engage in political conversation; others may have other ways of engaging in such conversations outside of social media. Some users choose to not become involved in politics at all, so they do not need to participate in political conversation on social media. For example, in 2010, only 22% of social media users used social media to engage in political conversations on Twitter.¹¹ Of those individuals who engage in politics via social media, some users only talk about certain political events. For example, there are fewer participants in social media conversations regarding gubernatorial elections compared to national elections, not only because of a smaller population of people in one state than all fifty states combined, but also because people do not give as much weight to gubernatorial elections as they do to national elections, especially presidential elections.¹²

Many users that participate in politics on social media, however, are politically involved in other ways outside of social media. In many cases political activity on social media sites is “intricately intertwined” with political activity in the real world; on the other hand, a number of

¹¹ Smith, A. (2011) 22% of online Americans used social networking or Twitter for politics in 2010 campaign. Pew Research Center: internet and technology. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/01/27/22-of-online-americans-used-social-networking-or-twitter-for-politics-in-2010-campaign/>

¹² Bekafigo, M. A., & McBride, A. (2013). Who tweets about politics? Political participation of Twitter users during the 2011 gubernatorial elections. *Social Science Computer Review*, 31(5), 625-643.

people who are uninvolved in political activity in other forms of political engagement are also uninvolved on social media platforms.¹³ Another point to consider is that while many political actors use social media in conjunction with their real-world political activity or conversations, there is yet another group of people who prefer to keep their political conversations and activity off social media, and stick to these traditional ways of communicating their political preferences with others. These people contribute substantially to political conversations and any activity which may result in political polarization, but in ways which cannot be measured in this paper with the political activity of social media users.

Since social media has the potential to draw people into a political conversation who otherwise do not expose themselves to channels in which political conversation occurs, there have been some instances in which social media can draw voters who are otherwise uninvolved in expressing their opinion on political topics to become active members of participatory democracy.¹⁴ Social media sources allow users to be more actively engaged with politics and policy issues, empower people to speak their mind, get perspectives from both inside and outside of their community, and allows users to vocalize their support or disagreement with institutions such as the government.¹⁵ This potential to bring new participants into the political conversation may be attributed to the simplified manner in which users can express opinion; it also takes away face-to-face confrontation that occurs in more traditional forms of political debate, which tends

¹³ Bekafigo, M. A., & McBride, A. (2013). Who tweets about politics? Political participation of Twitter users during the 2011 gubernatorial elections. *Social Science Computer Review*, 31(5), 625-643.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sobkowicz, P., Kaschesky, M., & Bouchard, G. (2012). Opinion mining in social media: Modeling, simulating, and forecasting political opinions in the web. *Government Information Quarterly*, 29(4), 470-479.

to deter non-confrontational people from voicing their opinions.¹⁶ Many people who otherwise tend to withdraw from heavily opinionated debates because they are non-confrontational will engage in the political conversation on social media outlets because they do not have to directly confront their political opponents. Instead, they have a computer or phone screen to separate them from the other party, which can help non-confrontational individuals to voice their otherwise unheard opinions. Another factor that encourages these non-confrontational people to feel comfortable sharing their opinions is that depending on the platform, social media allows users to create their own networks of like-minded people through selective exposure (further discussed later in this paper). As a result, social media users seldom have many opponents if they are primarily engaging within their social media networks, unless they have friends, family members or followers who disagree with their stance on an issue. Some individuals who may be concerned about their ability to fully articulate their opinions may also resort to using social media to communicate their opinions, because social media allows people to abridge their ideas to be more readable to other users or to make a given character limit.¹⁷

By breaking down these barriers which tend to favor traditional political participants, social media allows for a more participatory democracy by giving everyone a way to express their opinions.¹⁸ Opening channels of communication to anyone with social media and allowing people who otherwise do not talk about politics helps otherwise politically uninvolved individuals to gather information that they choose not to receive from traditional media sources

¹⁶ Ott, B. L. (2017). The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34(1), 59-68.

¹⁷ Sanders, S (2016). Did social media ruin Election 2016? NPR <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/08/500686320/did-social-media-ruin-election-2016>

¹⁸ Mossberger K., Tolbert C. J., McNeal R. (2008). *Digital citizenship: The internet, society and participation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

or their close social network, and can help these individuals form their opinion from this information, shaping their thoughts and even their ideologies as a whole. Regardless, the most important thing to consider when looking at political conversations on social media is that not all users use social media for political purposes, so while predictions about shaping individuals' ideologies can come from research on social media, conclusions cannot be made about the population of social media users as a whole when analyzing the influence of social media on political beliefs.

When looking at the different participants of political conversation on social media, one of the most influential groups of participants is the group of people who engage in the political conversation and are identified as opinion leaders. According to C.S. Park, an opinion leader is someone “who influence[s] opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and behaviors” of others.¹⁹ Opinion leaders affect public opinion through priming, framing and agenda setting. Agenda setting is the most influential aspect of an opinion leader or a news source on social media, as it involves determining which issues are the most important to discuss. For example, an opinion leader may spend more time advocating for climate change than economic issues because it is an issue that they have deemed more necessary to discuss in current events. Priming involves exposure to certain information, which causes this information to be more salient in an individual's mind. Opinion leaders prime users to consider certain political issues that users may have not previously considered or had a strong opinion regarding the topic; for example, if an opinion leader is an advocate for the ban of plastic straws, users who follow this opinion leader who did not initially consider plastic straw use to be an issue may take a position on the issue.

¹⁹ Park, C. S. (2013). Does Twitter motivate involvement in politics? Tweeting, opinion leadership, and political engagement. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(4), 1641-1648.

The way that opinion leaders frame an issue is also influential to users, as framing an issue affects how the issue is cast, which can influence support for an issue. Using the plastic straw example, advocates may frame the issue as the main contribution to climate change, while other environmentalists may discuss the issue as a minor contribution to the issue, but an issue that users can actually take action on to help the cause.

Opinion leaders exist in both traditional media and social media, but there are some differences between the characteristics of opinion leaders in traditional media and social media. Opinion leaders in traditional media are typically people who are well known and well respected by the general public, including experts on a certain issue, political leaders, and even celebrities; these traditional media opinion leaders also typically come from a relatively high socioeconomic status.²⁰ However, social media opinion leaders can come from all walks of life, including people of lower socioeconomic status and popularity than traditional media opinion leaders, because anyone with a social media account can gain fame or recognition.²¹ In fact, when you strip down the meaning of social media to its simplest form, and analyze social media users, anyone with a faithful following of users who trust their opinions on current events can be considered an opinion leader, shaping other peoples' opinions.

How opinion leaders distribute information on social media also differs from the way opinion leaders in traditional media distribute information through the differences of structure in the two types of media. Traditional media information distribution follows a two-step flow theory in which mass media sources communicate information to the opinion leaders, who then communicate the information to the public. Due to the different structure of social media

²⁰ Park, C. S. (2013). Does Twitter motivate involvement in politics? Tweeting, opinion leadership, and political engagement. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(4), 1641-1648.

²¹ *Ibid.*

compared to traditional media in how people receive information, information on social media is distributed in a different pattern, the multi-step diffusion method, in which multiple social media accounts and platforms communicate the same information simultaneously, which changes how the general population receives information from opinion leaders.²² Opinion leaders on social media play a major role in engaging social media users because the multi-step diffusion process circulates information on a broader spectrum, which allows opinion leaders to reach a larger audience through this process. Consequentially, studies have shown that opinion leadership on social media “tends to increase Twitter users’ engagement” in politics.²³ This engagement can do everything from shape opinion to mobilize voters in elections; therefore, the information communicated to social media users by opinion leaders can affect the political climate in the United States, since users who become involved in politics from social media opinion leaders rely heavily on their source’s information.

Opinion leaders can contribute to social media’s polarized environment by having a strong influence in the dialogue between voters and politicians. When raising awareness of an issue that the opinion leader or their followers deem important, many opinion leaders will directly address a politician or group of politicians regarding their stance on the given issue. Those opinion leaders who engage in this dialogue do so for two main reasons. First, the opinion leader believes that the politician supports their position on a movement, or even supports policy to address the issue at hand; the politician may choose to respond to these opinion leaders to show support or call for change on the issue and motivate like-minded users to vote for the politician, with proof that they support the issue because of their dialogue with an opinion leader.

²² Park, C. S. (2013). Does Twitter motivate involvement in politics? Tweeting, opinion leadership, and political engagement. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(4), 1641-1648.

²³ *Ibid.*

If a politician agrees with the opinion leader and calls for change on the given issue, the opinion leaders' followers generally support the politician and their platforms about this issue; if this politician is heavily polarized in their ideology, this will polarize those individuals who support the politician. An opinion leader may also participate in dialogue with a candidate or group of politicians for a second reason: because they feel the candidate has a "wrong" stance on the issue and will try to change politicians' minds, or at least show others they personally dissent to a politician's ideology to motivate users to use their vote against the politician. Politicians may respond in these cases by expressing opposition to the opinion leader's opinion or denying change of their stance on an issue to show the opinion leaders dissent of their opinion. If the opinion leaders' followers see this dissent from the politician that the opinion leader opposes, the follower will also oppose the politician's stance on the issue. If the politician opposes an issue on which the follower has a strong opinion, the follower may also distrust the politicians' stances on other current events. This distrust can cause the follower to distance themselves from the ideology of the opponent to their position, polarizing the follower in the opposite direction of the politician. Whichever way opinion leaders utilize dialogue with politicians, the conversation primes users to consider the topics debated among the opinion leader and the politician.

The demographic of social media users also affects political discussion on social media and how people may perceive polarization. While a large demographic is represented on social media from multiple platforms, individual platforms are not as representative of the sociodemographic makeup of the United States and therefore are unrepresentative of overall ideology.²⁴ For example, Snapchat is one of the newest social media sites; while the application

²⁴ DiGrazia, J., McKelvey, K., Bollen, J., & Rojas, F. (2013). More tweets, more votes: Social media as a quantitative indicator of political behavior. *PloS one*, 8(11), e79449.

mostly consists of sending pictures to each other, it presents different news sources (such as CNN and NowThis), voter education specials, and even a link to register to vote in the 2018 midterm election. Many users utilize these other resources that Snapchat provides, so it could be wrongly assumed that Snapchat urging people to vote may have an influence on the whole voter population; however, according to a 2019 data analysis, over 70% of Snapchat users are under the age of 34.²⁵ Twitter has a similar demographic representation, in which 36% of American Twitter users are between the ages of 18 and 29 years old, the largest proportion of age groups represented.²⁶ Out of three social media applications researched, Facebook included the highest proportion of the older population; 72% of internet users between the ages of 50-64 use Facebook, and 62% of internet users over the age of 65 use Facebook.²⁷ While Facebook has the highest proportion of the older population using their services, a Pew Research Center survey in 2012 shows that the age with the highest appeal of all of these social media sites is the 18-29 year-old demographic.²⁸

Since this age demographic is more prevalent on social media sites than other age demographics, an age skew towards the younger generation on social media may skew ideological data. The younger voting-age population tends to be more liberal, compared to older generations; 54% of the Millennial generation (ages 18-35) identify as liberal, compared to 48% of Generation X(36-51), 44% of the Baby Boomer generation (52-70) and only 31% of the Silent generation (71+) identify as liberal.²⁹ Although these differences in percentages are small in

²⁵ OmniCore (2016). “Snapchat by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts”

²⁶ OmniCore (2016). “Twitter by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts”

²⁷ OmniCore (2016). “Facebook by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts”

²⁸ Duggan, M., & Brenner, J. (2013). *The demographics of social media users, 2012* (Vol. 14). Washington, DC: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project.

²⁹ Maniam, S. & Smith, S (2017). “A wider partisan and ideological gap between younger, older generations” Washington, DC: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project.

comparison to their immediately preceding or subsequent generation, the stark 23% difference between Millennials and the Silent generation show how large a generational difference can be in regards to political ideology. Since social media appeals most to the younger generations, this higher number of individuals identifying as liberal can skew the overall social media content to be more liberal. Since a larger number of liberal social media users than conservative social media users can increase the frequency which Democrat users will voice more left-leaning opinions on issues, the disproportionate use of social media by younger users than older generations will affect how social media shapes political ideologies of users and can strengthen the public opinion polarization as a result of using social media. This ideological disproportion that results from generational representation can aid in polarizing consumers.

High Choice Media Environment

Social media is one component that makes up the modern phenomena of a high choice media environment. When mass media first became prevalent, there were limited resources for news: few newspapers and similar publications could circulate well enough and fast enough across towns and states to communicate information efficiently. When television broadcast was first available to the public, there were few channels that held a “captive audience” of viewers, who would watch whatever the channels broadcast because of their limited options.³⁰ If the channels broadcast news, which had to appeal to a large and diverse audience, viewers would have only two options: watch the news or do not watch television at all. However, over time as more print media was published, and technology such as radio, televisions and the internet was invented, news became more easily circulated. Many different forms of media and individual

³⁰ Prior, M. (2007). *Post-broadcast democracy: How media choice increases inequality in political involvement and polarizes elections*. Cambridge University Press.

media outlets became available from which society could choose to learn information. Today, there are thousands of ways for consumers to obtain information, from local and national newspapers, to AM and FM radio stations, to thousands of nationwide news stations, and online news outlets, all transmitting what they perceive as the most important information.

Since there is an endless variety of news outlets, users have to choose what they decide to read, hear, or watch, transforming a once “captive audience” to a selective audience. In many cases this has deterred people from obtaining news from traditional media sources, instead devoting their television time to shows for entertainment purposes. In fact, research has shown that individuals who have access to hundreds of television tend to only pay attention to less than twenty channels.³¹ While this wide variety of content on television has resulted in a number of television watchers to opt out of watching the news, the large number of channels has also allowed for partisan news sources to succeed in an outlet that was once dominated by neutral, non-partisan news sources. By choosing which media outlets to pay attention to, people engage in an activity known as selective exposure. Selective exposure is the phenomenon in which individuals “seek information confirming their prior belief” while also “avoid[ing] information challenging” their held beliefs.³² While, as previously mentioned, selective exposure is inevitable due to the sheer volume of available media outlets, selective exposure affects public opinion, since people with preexisting beliefs are unlikely to obtain information from sources that contradict their own beliefs. Selective exposure causes audience fragmentation to occur, in which consumers use “media freedom to watch, read and hear about more politics than they used

³¹ Webster, J. (2005). Beneath the Veneer of Fragmentation: Television Audience Polarization in a Multichannel World, *Journal of Communication* 55(2), 366-82.

³² Chan, Jimmy, and Daniel F. Stone. Media Proliferation and Partisan Selective Exposure. *Public Choice* 156, no. 3/4 (2013): 467-90.

to,” while some users abandon news altogether in their media consumption.³³ While this choice by some consumers disregard news on media sources, it must be noted that the choice to avoid news is *not* indicative of reduced political interest in these consumers.³⁴

Just like traditional media, selective exposure happens in social media, but in a unique manner. Selective exposure can occur when people decide other users to follow (especially in regards to the opinion leaders which they choose to follow), or topics of interests to mark as important for their timeline, a feature available to Pinterest, Reddit and Tumblr users; users can also block any users or even phrases on Twitter which they do not want to see, filtering the information they receive. When choosing which media outlets and information sources to follow, an individual establishes a trust network, or a network of information sources which the individual perceives as reliable. Trust networks influence the information which a person believes or does not believe.³⁵ The difference between social media and traditional media in selective exposure, however, is that when traditional media consumers opt out of watching news, they simply do not see any news; in social media, there is still a chance that a news story or political opinion can appear on their “timeline,” so even when they actively opt out of following news sources or political commentators they can still see these sources. This accidental exposure to unwanted information can happen to all users, but it is arguably most likely to happen to sporadic, socializers or lurkers, who only use social media sparingly and therefore may not take as much consideration about blocking users or muting words and phrases. While this can be

³³ Prior, M. (2007). Post-broadcast democracy: How media choice increases inequality in political involvement and polarizes elections. *Cambridge University Press*.

³⁴ Prior, M. (2007). Post-broadcast democracy: How media choice increases inequality in political involvement and polarizes elections. *Cambridge University Press*.

³⁵ Metaxas, P. T., & Mustafaraj, E. (2012). Social media and the elections. *Science*, 338(6106), 472-473.

possible, not enough research has yet been conducted to prove this theory in this paper. Given the possibility of accidental exposure to unwanted information, social media users do not have total selective exposure as they may have with traditional media, but they still have a majority of power over what they decide to see. By choosing which media sources from which to obtain information, including social media sources, individuals are limiting sources which could reshape or even change their opinion on issues on which they have preexisting biases.

Selective exposure can lead individuals to participate in partisan-motivated reasoning. Partisan-motivated reasoning is the phenomenon in which “individuals interpret information through the lens of their party” and the party’s stance on a given issue.³⁶ Partisan-motivated reasoning is considered by researchers as the “glue for like-minded people” that “reinforces their confirmation biases” of their opinions of certain issues.³⁷ Individuals who participate in partisan-motivated reasoning process information about issues in a way that minimizes their need to reconsider their partisan allegiance; rather than analyzing information in a way that is neutral to partisan influence and letting the information sway their beliefs, they interpret the information in a way that causes the information to affirm their beliefs. If an individual does not agree with a piece of information because it goes against their position on the topic, they will disregard the information, argue that the given information is not valid, or find a way to reinterpret the information in a way that it actually affirms rather than denies their position on an issue. Individuals may not even necessarily notice that they participate in partisan-motivated reasoning. Some people subconsciously gravitate to this behavior by continuously defending their own beliefs to themselves when receiving information, which results in the individual only paying

³⁶ Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook (2014). The influence of partisan motivated reasoning on public opinion. *Springer Science*.

³⁷ Kapko, M (2016). How social media is shaping the 2016 presidential election. *CIO*.

attention to information that will solidify their personal beliefs or conditioning themselves to alter the information in a way that it will adhere to their own set of beliefs.

Social media is a prime example of how individuals can participate in partisan-motivated reasoning to strengthen their beliefs and opinions on a given topic. Its structure allows users to select who they follow, which allows them to filter information to limit what they see through their accounts and timelines. By giving users the opportunity to screen the information that they receive, social media enables “individuals with very narrow interests” to “quickly and easily connect with others who share their beliefs” who support and affirm the users’ beliefs instead of people who challenge their opinion on a given issue.³⁸ Partisan-motivated reasoning also narrows the scope of information that an individual receives on an issue, because rather than taking in all of the information regarding a certain topic, the social media user only takes in the information that they determine pertinent to upholding their personal beliefs, giving them only a partial understanding of a situation. In fact, users will ignore posts that do not align with their beliefs about 66% of the time, and users block or unfollow users who post such information around 18% of the time.³⁹ This issue stems from the user’s own disinterest in receiving all of the information, rather than simply not being able to receive all information about the topic, since most related information to an issue is available on social media. Even when users come across unwanted information that has made it through the careful filter that many users create for themselves through selective exposure, they will twist this information in a manner that will affirm the partisan-motivated user’s belief. By choosing to primarily communicate with people who agree with a user about their position on an issue and supporting their beliefs rather than

³⁸ Kapko, M (2016). How social media is shaping the 2016 presidential election. *CIO*.

³⁹ Lee, J. K., Choi, J., Kim, C., & Kim, Y. (2014). Social media, network heterogeneity, and opinion polarization. *Journal of communication*, 64(4), 702-722.

exposing themselves to a diversity of opinions and beliefs, tuning out any information that they do not consider beneficial or using such information to support their opinion on a situation and strengthening their own beliefs by monopolizing the information they view, social media users become more polarized on an individual scale, which contributes to the overall polarization of the political climate, especially on social media.

One of the unique and most influential components of social media that encourages partisan-motivated reasoning is the presence of accounts that use false identification often generated by computers or bots, more commonly referred to as “spam accounts.” Spam accounts influence public opinion in two significant ways: polarization and trust networks. These spam accounts are generally heavily polarized, and the information that spam accounts generate is often incorrect or contains language that “strategically influence[s] other users,” manipulating social media usage and attempting to further divide users on opposite ends of the political spectrum.⁴⁰ Spam accounts can also come from generators outside of the population directly affected by certain political activity; for example, in the 2016 United States election there were over 50,000 spam accounts run by Russian-based organizations that sought to influence the US presidential election, and another organization called the Internet Research Agency that “sought to influence elections around the globe,” including the U.S. presidential election, to boost a campaign that they deem favorable to their own agenda, while sabotaging campaigns deemed unfavorable.⁴¹ As a result of their unverifiable information, spam accounts are often skewed and falsifies data because the spam accounts are heavily polarized, which affects social media users’

⁴⁰ Ruths, D., & Pfeffer, J. (2014). Social media for large studies of behavior. *Science*, 346(6213), 1063-1064.

⁴¹ Sommerfeldt, C (2018). How the indicted Russians carried out their social media plot to mess with the 2016 presidential election. *NY Daily News*.

trust networks by spreading false data and causes users to have a general distrust of any information relayed on social media.

Spam accounts can cause users to support their beliefs with false information. In the 2016 election over 1.4 million Twitter users interacted with Russian spam accounts, either retweeting or liking posts or following the spam accounts, assuming the information to be valid without verifying the account's credibility.⁴² If users do not fact check the information spread by spam accounts and simply assume the information to be true, the false information can drastically influence their opinion. When these users' support their political beliefs with false information, it can result in further polarization because users will discredit opinions from users with opposing beliefs because of the false information used to support their decisions. Spam accounts also attempt to compromise individuals' trust networks, especially through media "bombs," whose purposes can vary from sending instant replies to messages on Twitter to strategically advertising or promoting certain websites on search engines on Google.⁴³ These social media bombs work to alter an individual's trust network by causing the individual to question the validity of certain sources or adding information that would alter their perception of given information. Affecting the trust network affects polarization, because when people question sources that they usually trust, they will generally look for other sources of information which uphold or strengthen their belief or opinion on a given issue. Spam accounts that leak false information will prime users to consider issues that may have initially been considered insignificant or non-controversial. For example, many spam accounts in the 2016 election that urged users to vote for Donald Trump

⁴² Twitter Public Policy (2018). Update on Twitter's review of the 2016 US election. *Twitter*.

⁴³ Metaxas, P. T., & Mustafaraj, E. (2012). Social media and the elections. *Science*, 338(6106), 472-473.

emphasized Hillary Clinton's deleted emails, which primed many users to consider the emails to be a serious issue to consider when casting their ballot.

Spam accounts will also frame the given issues in a way that influences how the user decides to form their opinion on the topic. Exposure to spam accounts' false information will frame a social media user participating in the political conversation in one of two ways: 1) the user will use the false, polarized information to uphold their opinions, which in turn will be discredited by opponents to the individual; or 2) the user will turn to trusted sources that will discredit the false information and further uphold their opposition to the issue that was supported by false information, and make them wary of any other information provided about the given topic. Whichever way the spam account affects the user, the false information produced by the spam account will polarize those who encounter the information by creating a gap between those who believe the false information and those who discredit the information.

Structure of Social Media

The very structure of social media gives it a distinct effect of shaping public opinion and can even further polarize public opinion in the way that it allows people to express their opinions. While as previously mentioned, social media as a medium has no space limit so no news story or opinion is too insignificant to share; however, social media is seen by most as a quick way to share their opinion with others, so many will shorthand or summarize their opinion on an issue. For some social media sites, such as Twitter, a character limit requires this abridged nature of an opinion. The shorthanded structure of social media limits people from making a "sophisticated, political view" on an issue, simply because they have to make a character limit.⁴⁴ Such an unsophisticated expression of opinion, mixed with the high volume of available

⁴⁴ Sanders, S (2016). Did social media ruin Election 2016? *NPR*.

information, results in seemingly more polarized opinions, even if the user has a neutral feeling about the issue.⁴⁵ Neutral opinions can even seem polarized in social media posts because users do not have time to explain their rationale about why they take their position on an issue, or if they agree about one part of an argument but not another, they may not have time to fully explain with which they both agree and disagree, they will focus on only their agreement or disagreement with the issue. For example, a supporter of gun control, but just for assault weapons, will probably not be able to fit their rationale about why they only support gun control for assault weapons but not for shotguns; instead, they will just say something along the lines of “we need gun control policy.” While they know their rationale, and may even verbally explain their position on the argument to others, people who simply read their social media post will only think that they are completely opposed to the Second Amendment, making the user seem more heavily polarized than they truly are. As a result, people who gauge opinion on public opinion through social media will find that many posts seem worded in a way that would indicate strong polarization, when in fact the user is simply trying to shorthand their opinion to make a character limit.

Social Media as a Silencer of Weak or Neutral Opinions

A major effect that social media plays in shaping and polarizing public opinion is by expanding the phenomena of the “silent majority,” which is composed of actors in the political environment that are active in elections and other democratic activities, but tend to not publicly voice their opinions on issues and personal preferences of candidates for elections. While the silent majority existed before social media, social media has contributed to expanding the silent

⁴⁵ Hong, S., & Kim, S. H. (2016). Political polarization on twitter: Implications for the use of social media in digital governments. *Government Information Quarterly*, 33(4), 777-782.

majority in a manner unlike social media. The silent majority consists of mostly sporadics, lurkers and socializers, as they do not use social media primarily for political conversations like many debaters and actives.⁴⁶ For some users, joining the silent majority is a result of psychological pressures: if an individual feels that their opinions on an issue do not closely align to their peers, they tend to stay silent about issues to prevent conflict with these peers, or they feel uncertain that their opinion is valid.⁴⁷ Sometimes, individuals feel pressured enough by their peer's opinions to change their beliefs so that their beliefs align more closely to such opinions.

Opinion leaders also have a strong influence on social media's silent majority. As discussed before, opinion leaders have strong opinions on hot topic issues and are very vocal about these issues on social media, often posting highly emotional or severely worded messages on their social media accounts. Opinion leaders and social media users with strong opinions largely make social media users with neutral opinions to feel obliged to have a strong opinion on the given issue. Many of these people can also feel discouraged by partisan users to be involved in politics, since they experience how opinions can divide the public through exposure to heavily opinionated posts. Users who become discouraged tend to distance themselves from political conversations because they do not want to be involved in the political environment on social media. Since neutral parties are pressured to opt out of this political conversation because of pressure to take a side on topics, the remaining users participating in political conversation are often more opinionated participants and engage in highly polarized posts and discussions, which

⁴⁶ Brandtzaeg, P. B., & Heim, J. (2011). A typology of social networking sites users. *International Journal of Web Based Communities*, 7(1), 28-51.

⁴⁷ Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). The spiral of silence a theory of public opinion. *Journal of communication*, 24(2), 43-51.

can lead to tension and strong arguments among users on the extreme, polarized ends of topics that are heavily disputed on social media platforms.

While a number of individuals belong to the silent majority because of their moderate opinions, there are also the non-participants in politics in which some consumers simply choose to not pay attention to or follow news sources or political commentators. These non-participants tend to be those users who use social media as an entertainment source or other non-political purposes (for example, socializers only use social media to talk to or check on their friends), so they do not participate in the political conversation because they simply do not wish to use social media for this purpose. These individuals may have certain political preferences which could affect polarization of social media; however, they do not choose to disclose these opinions on social media. There are also social media users who may be very politically involved in other aspects of their life, but choose to not discuss politics on social media because they do not want to argue with other users, or they think that their attempts to discuss politics in this manner are futile. Also, while many opinion leaders have strong opinions about issues, as well as active users and debaters who openly share their political opinions, not all users who share their political opinions on social media are strongly polarized. There are also users who may have a neutral opinion on political issues that resist the social pressures that force others into the silent majority and still actively share their political ideas. These users are also important when analyzing the political environment on social media as they contribute to conversation by giving some neutrality to politics on social media.

While this issue of the silent majority prevailed long before social media was invented, social media intensifies the issue as a result of the two-way communication method, which can result in high tensions and strong language used in social media posts covering political topics.

Noelle-Neumann explains these results by discussing how “dominating opinion...compels compliance of behavior and attitude” from users who view posts written by those with strongly polarized beliefs of a given topic.⁴⁸ Many posts regarding highly controversial issues involve phrases such as “if you disagree with me unfollow me” or “I cannot be friends with people who believe [the opposite of the user’s beliefs],” which makes many social media users with opposing positions on highly controversial issues feel uneasy for expressing their own opinions on an issue. In fact, in a study conducted by Pew Research Center, 59% of people who discuss politics on social media find it stressful and frustrating when talking about politics with someone they disagree with, while only 35% find this process interesting or informative, which may be a result of this tension that people see between other users with conflicting ideas fight online.⁴⁹ As a result, out of fear of becoming socially isolated from their peers, these users, which represent a surprisingly large population of social media users, typically remain silent about their beliefs, further expanding the silent majority in the political climate. When the neutral or weak opinion-holding members of the silent majority feels pressured to withhold their opinions on social media, there lacks a measurable “middle ground” of opinions which generally encompasses a large proportion of the population and their opinions. Thus, the silent majority is arguably the most influential factor of polarization on social media, as it skews people’s perception of the true measure of people’s interest and positions on current events, giving off an effect of strong polarization, when in fact many users fall into the “middle ground” between the two ends of the spectrum, making other users feel pressured to also form a strongly polarized opinion about

⁴⁸ Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). The spiral of silence a theory of public opinion. *Journal of communication*, 24(2), 43-51.

⁴⁹ Duggan, M. and Smith, A. The Political Environment on Social Media. *Pew Research Center*.

issues they may not even fully understand to fit the status quo set by opinionated social media users.

Conclusion

While social media has many positive aspects which can draw individuals into the political conversation and can allow open communication between politicians, opinion leaders and “average people” who participate in the political debate, there are also many negative attributes of social media that can influence perceptions of public opinion and further polarize users. Traditional effects like the silent majority, partisan-motivated reasoning and selective exposure work together with unique effects from social media such as spam accounts and structural characteristics work together to shape public opinion in a unique way, encouraging users to hand-pick their sources of news and political commentary while discouraging sophisticated debate among users with conflicting opinions. These attributes also make any research regarding social media’s effect on politics difficult, as these factors cause inaccurate or skewed data, especially when taking into consideration the high volume of spam accounts seeking to affect those users who partake in partisan-motivated reasoning.

Social media illuminates the strides that mass media sources have made over time, transforming what used to be a “captive audience” limited to few news sources to a selective audience, giving them a number of choices when deciding what news sources to follow and to add to their trust network, as well as the choice to block or ignore other sources that do not support their political opinions, and even the choice to not pay attention to news at all. The high choice environment of social media, combined with the simple, shorthanded structure of posts which users share their opinions, has ultimately led to a relatively hostile forum for people to share their ideas, instead of an open space where people do not feel judged or pressured about

their opinions, which causes many users to shut down and hide their opinions. This issue, combined with the fake accounts that spreads false information across social media sites, causes problems when attempting to correctly analyze the political atmosphere of social media sites. If the only people participating in political conversations are heavily polarized who have to shorthand their opinions, and there are fake, heavily polarized accounts generated by companies or individuals seeking to divide users, how can researchers really measure the average opinion of users? If these users are only gathering information from accounts that they deem trustworthy, has social media really changed their opinion on issues at all? Researchers are trying to find a way in account for all social media users' political opinions, while discounting any fake accounts' opinions, but for the purpose of this paper the only research available for support has not yet found a way to quantify and or prove that social media has polarized the political climate. For now, the given information points to the argument that social media use polarizes users further along the political spectrum, making it seem that in the present-day situation a "middle ground" seems almost unattainable in the age of social media with information readily available to anyone with a Twitter or Facebook account.

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