**Democratic Destruction: Political Polarization in the Social Media Age**

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Our country began as thirteen colonies that were able to set aside their differences, recognize their common interests, and come together to form the United States of America. Our founders set forth a democracy that, at its center, required the same civil discourse and collaboration demonstrated by those original thirteen colonies. Today, that sense of unity and recognition of a higher purpose is rapidly fading from our political discourse. In its place, the hateful rhetoric and conflict of political polarization is reaching new heights. Alongside this troubling phenomenon has been the explosion of social media use, accompanied by a host of concerns regarding its impact on its users and society as a whole. A mounting body of research demonstrates that the parallel growth of social media and political polarization is no coincidence. I argue that social media exacerbates the issue of political polarization through its features and the environment they create, precipitating the decline of civil discourse and our democracy as a whole. In this paper, I will discuss the perils of growing political polarization and the emerging body of evidence indicting the role of social media. I aim to raise awareness of the ways in which social media harms us and our political society; while providing comprehensive solutions to this troubling issue.

**The Rise of Political Polarization and Its Ills**

Political polarization is on the rise throughout our country. It is difficult to scroll through social media or turn on the news and not find evidence of this troubling phenomenon plaguing our democracy. Following a study of the beliefs of “median Democrats” and “median Republicans” over the past twenty years, Pew Research Center concluded that the two parties are more ideologically divided than ever before (Geiger, 2021). While this level of division is troubling, the ‘ideological polarization’ evidenced here is not what is truly threatening our political society. The real danger for our democracy is the steep growth in ‘affective polarization’ in recent years. Researchers at NYU define affective polarization as “a form of partisan hostility characterized by seeing one’s opponents as not only wrong on important issues, but also abhorrent, unpatriotic, and a danger to the country’s future” (Barrett et al., 2021, p.1). It is this personal disdain for those who disagree with us that truly threatens our democracy. Civil discourse requires us to debate ideas and disagree while maintaining respect for one another. Affective polarization erodes this ability.

Unfortunately, this destructive form of polarization continues to expand its hold on our political society. Traditionally, researchers have measured affective polarization on a ‘feeling thermometer’ ranging from warm feelings and low affective polarization at 100° to cold and high polarization at 0°. In the 1970s, feelings of polarization were at a neutral 48°, but that number plummeted to 20° in 2020 (Barrett et al., 2021, p.4). This historic growth in affective polarization demonstrates the significance of this issue and the unprecedented situation we face. Many surveys have revealed the depth of this affective polarization among American citizens. A Pew study on polarization found that a growing number of Democrats and Republicans saw the other party as “a threat to the nation’s well-being” (Geiger, 2021, p.7). Following the 2020 election, the Edelman Trust Barometer found that 57% of respondents agreed with the statement, “The degree of political and ideological polarization in this country has gotten so extreme that I believe the U.S. is in the midst of a cold civil war” (Barrett et al., 2021, p.22). These survey results are an alarming demonstration of the deep levels of affective polarization at work in our country. Our political division goes far beyond disagreement, and it is only getting worse.

Such historic levels of polarization have significant ramifications for our democracy. The damage to our capacity for civil discourse is evident on social media, where inflammatory posts and vitriolic attacks run rampant. This lack of civil discourse damages families, friendships, and our ability to participate effectively in the political process. However, it is not just on the individual level where the ills of affective polarization take hold—the effects of polarization compound to scar all aspects of our political society. Polarization has undermined trust in our political institutions and damaged our ability to govern. The same lack of civility and understanding that plagues our citizens runs rampant among our elected officials, creating gridlock and driving Congressional approval ratings to rock bottom (Forgette, 2019). Polarization has even challenged the existence of commonly held facts, with citizens and politicians alike unable to agree on election results or the safety of Covid-19 vaccines (Barrett et al., 2021). Tragically, we have allowed polarization to reach the point of sparking political violence, as seen in the incident at the Capitol on January 6th. Polarization has profound and wide-reaching consequences that are significantly troubling for our Country. We must act swiftly to address this issue and prevent further damage to our democracy.

In order to understand the rise of polarization in recent years and act to combat its evils, we must examine the changing landscape of our political society. The rise of the internet and social media have transformed the way we learn about, think about, and discuss politics. Social media sites have become a public forum, where citizens and politicians alike air their views and beliefs on politics and current events. Studies have demonstrated that social media has become one of the main ways we consume news and interact with politicians (Liedke & Matsa, 2022; Rathje et al., 2021; Wojcieszak et al., 2022). Social media’s role as a news source has seen rapid growth since its inception. Over 70% of American adults consumed news on social media in 2019, compared to just one in eight in 2008 (Levy, 2021, p.831). The Pew Research center has found that a growing number of TikTok users are using the site for news (Liedke & Matsa, 2022). This is particularly concerning in light of the app’s teen audience and short format, which makes in-depth news coverage impractical. Considering the well-researched media effects studied by communications scholars, the expansion of social media news consumption warrants serious consideration of how the medium impacts agenda-setting, media bias, and our perception of the world around us. The ways in which these media effects play out on social media are highly consequential for our political society.

How we interact with news on social media is significant as well. Several researchers have raised concerns about users’ passive news consumption behaviors when interacting with social media. In his book on the political effects of media in the information age, Richard Forgette dubs this passive consumption ‘news grazing’. Forgette characterizes news grazing as “a tendency to collect news at irregular and shorter periods, often with a higher level of distraction” (Forgette, 2019, p.13). This tendency for passive news consumption on social media is problematic, as users are unlikely to think critically about the news they encounter. Users are also less likely to seek out alternative news stories from sources with different perspectives, given the passive nature of their consumption. These troubling tendencies lead to a less informed citizenry, spelling trouble for democratic governance and political polarization. Social media’s rapidly expanding role in political society and the discouraging news habits it can promote necessitates an investigation of the medium’s consequences for our democracy, particularly its role in the spread of political polarization.

The weight of the problem facing our nation must be made clear. Political polarization poses a systemic threat to our democracy and our society as a whole. At the same time, social media has cemented itself as a fixture of our everyday life as well as our political society. The growth of social media has altered our political interactions, our news-gathering habits, and our perception of the world around us. We must understand the consequences of social media and its role in the rise of political polarization. My research has led to the conclusion that certain aspects of social media and the environment it creates have exacerbated political polarization in recent years and will continue to damage our democracy if nothing is done. To be clear, social media is not the origin of this polarizing plague, nor is it the sole perpetuator. However, social media has had a significant role in spreading affective polarization and accelerating its grip on our nation. This role is evident in the growing body of research indicting social media and demonstrating how it harms its users and their society.

**The Case Against Social Media**

While social media executives have repeatedly denied their products’ role in amplifying political polarization, a growing number of researchers disagree. Numerous studies, reports, and articles have described the ways in which social media plays a role in political polarization and have reached a consensus as to its culpability. A political polarization report from NYU’s Stern Center for Business and Human Rights concluded, “use of those [social media] platforms intensifies divisiveness and thus contributes to its corrosive consequences” (Barrett et al., 2021, p.1). The New York Times called Facebook “one of the world’s most polarizing corporations” whose “business model is optimized to keep people scrolling their Facebook feeds, amplifying divisive and inflammatory content and exaggerating political divisions in society” (Satariano & Kang, 2021). On the academic front, fifteen researchers from the nation’s leading universities concluded from a study on political division that “social media companies like Facebook and Twitter have played an influential role in political discourse, intensifying political sectarianism” (Finkel et al., 2021). There is a clear consensus on the role of social media in exacerbating political polarization and its effects. Researchers have noted the role of social media in the realm of politics, its demonstrated role in the spread of polarization, and the effects it has on political society.

Several other studies have investigated the ways in which social media operates and reached the conclusion that social media is to blame for the rapid expansion of political polarization in recent years. One such study from the American Economic Review examined the role of social media news consumption in the spread of polarization. In the study, researchers provided subscriptions to Facebook news pages from across the political spectrum and compared the impact on polarization to that of a control group. The study found that social media news is significantly more biased and polarizing than news from other sources, with 57% of individuals consuming news that is more conservative than the Wall Street Journal or more liberal than the Washington Post. (Levy, 2021, p.848). This heightened bias was accompanied by social media algorithms’ alteration of news-gathering habits, which exposed users to pro-attitudinal sources and reduced exposure to opposing views. Ultimately, these discoveries led to the conclusion that consuming news through social media exacerbates political polarization.

Another experiment explored social media’s impacts by modeling how social networks take shape and information is shared on Twitter. The study found that social media encourages conflict avoidance, which removes news sources and individuals that contradict users’ opinions from their network. These findings led to the conclusion that social media increases ideological segregation, polarization, and distrust of mainstream media, and amplifies selective exposure (Coscia & Rossi, 2022, p.1). Ultimately, the study demonstrated the role of social media in creating a polarizing information environment to the detriment of political society.

Lastly, an analysis of out-group political language on social media found that the algorithms utilized by social media sites actively promote divisive language. Researchers found that posts containing animosity towards political opponents were more likely to go viral, and thus users were encouraged to participate in such behavior. These results led to the conclusion that “The design structure of social media platforms may be creating perverse incentives for polarizing content” (Rathje et al., 2021, p.7). Thus, implicating the role of social media in intensifying political polarization on yet another front.

If the numerous studies demonstrating social media’s impact on political polarization were not proof enough, there is significant evidence of social media companies’ awareness of the impacts of their products on society. Nevertheless, they ignore these damaging effects on our political society to maintain their lucrative profits garnered through polarized engagement. After leaving his position as a design ethicist at Google, parent company of YouTube, Tristan Harris testified before Congress that “Their [Social Media Companies’] business model is to create a society that is addicted, outraged, polarized, performative, and disinformed” (Barrett et al., 2021, p.3). These companies have little reason to depart from this business model, considering engagement-based ad revenue accounted for 98% of Facebook’s and 81% of YouTube’s billions of dollars in revenue in 2020 (Barrett et al., 2021, p.8). There is strong incentive for these public corporations to turn a blind eye to their products’ damaging results for political discourse.

There is a clear motive for allowing political polarization to run rampant on social media platforms. However, there is even more incriminating evidence that social media companies are aware of the consequences of their products. Surprisingly, social media giants such as Facebook conduct significant private research into the societal impacts of the platforms they oversee. While many of these studies never reach public scrutiny, one study of the impacts of Facebook on political polarization following the 2016 election leaked to the Wall Street Journal. A slide from Facebook’s internal presentation reads, “Our algorithms exploit the human brain’s attraction to divisiveness…if left unchecked Facebook would feed users more and more divisive content in an effort to gain user attention & increase time on the platform” (Horwitz & Seetharaman, 2020). This leaked study shows that Facebook has been aware of its polarizing effects for years. Unsurprisingly, Facebook largely ignored these findings and disbanded the research group that produced them (Horwitz & Seetharaman, 2020).

This study is not the only effort to address polarization that Facebook has scrapped. Over the years, Facebook has attempted various measures to address its platform’s implications for political polarization, though most have been shuddered because of their impact on engagement metrics. One measure aimed at inoculating the algorithm’s promotion of divisive language allowed users to flag posts as “bad for the world” so that they could then be down-ranked by the algorithm. However, Facebook found that the measure decreased engagement, and it was subsequently abandoned (Rathje et al., 2021). Facebook has also demonstrated its awareness of its impact on news-gathering habits by developing what the company calls ‘News Ecosystem Quality’ (NEQ) ratings. These secret ratings are given to news organizations to rate their credibility and level of partisanship (Barrett et al., 2021, p.12). Facebook utilizes these NEQ ratings as a part of its ‘dial-turning measures’, in which the company can tweak its personalization algorithms to avoid steering users to politically oriented content (Barrett et al., 2021, p.12). This tool is used during controversial events, such as the 2020 election, the Derek Chauvin trial, and several other “emergency situations”, according to Facebook (Barrett et al., 2021, p.12). Perplexingly, these tools aimed at combating political polarization are not used regularly. Facebook has an awareness of the problem and the capability to address it. However, the company allows the proliferation of political polarization to continue at the expense of American Democracy and for the benefit of its shareholders.

The evidence against Silicon Valley is damning. As I have shown, numerous academics have conducted studies on a wide array of social media features, each concluding that social media amplifies the rise in political polarization in this country. Whether through the content it promotes, the behaviors it encourages, or the environments it creates, social media aids the spread of political polarization that needs no help erupting in our already fractured political society. This disaster has been noted by journalists, universities, researchers, and even members of the social media industry. Even more condemning is the evidence that social media companies are aware of their role in exacerbating political polarization. Yet, dishearteningly, these companies and their executives ignore the remedies at their disposal in favor of profit. While the leaders of these corporations are correct to assert that they are neither the cause of political division nor the sole contributor, there is irrefutable evidence of the endemic role of social media platforms in the rise of affective polarization.

**The Means of Polarization**

Social media has played a significant role in the burgeoning political polarization we face as a nation. In light of this, it is crucial to understand the means through which these platforms are escalating this polarization. If we as a society have a more thorough understanding of how social media is dividing us, we will be able to use these platforms with the caution they require and develop much-needed solutions to the problems we face. The polarizing features of social media have been ingrained in the user experience of these platforms. Thus, it is only through greater awareness of these features that we can limit the polarizing influence of social media. Through my research, I have synthesized two primary ways social media exercises its polarizing effects. The first is personalization algorithms. The second is the development of partisan ‘echo chambers’ on social media sites. Both have various damaging effects that work individually and cooperatively to advance polarization at all levels of our political society.

The building blocks of social media’s polarizing effects are personalization algorithms. Simply put, algorithms are responsible for the content you see and the order in which you see it. These formulas utilize the enormous amounts of data social media companies have on their users to promote relevant content and generate engagement. Proponents of these algorithms contend that they provide a more engaging experience for users by promoting content they will find interesting. It is this engagement-boosting factor that makes algorithms popular among social media companies and their shareholders. However, there are growing concerns about the negative impacts algorithms can have on the people using social media, including the significant opinion-shaping effects they can have (Perra & Rocha, 2019). Among these concerns is the variety of ways personalization algorithms exacerbate political polarization.

One way personalization algorithms exacerbate polarization online is by promoting partisan news sources. In a study of the effects of Twitter’s algorithms on political content, researchers found that these personalization algorithms promote sources rated as partisan and suppress news coverage from neutral sources (Huszàr et al., 2022). Considering that social media sites are becoming an increasingly significant part of the American media diet; it is troubling that these algorithms are creating a social media experience that is inherently prone to bias. Further, in light of the passive news consumption users exhibit on social media platforms, this inherent bias can have much stronger effects because users are not applying the same critical thinking skills they would to traditional media. As social media users are subjected to a biased and polarizing media environment, they begin to adopt the polarized attitudes surrounding them. With little access to neutral, unbiased news and diminished critical thinking, it becomes difficult for users to avoid the polarizing effects of the social media news environment. As a result, algorithms are actively creating a polarized media environment on social media and furthering the divisions among users.

Aside from the polarized media environment algorithms create, they also incentivize extremism and negativity. Several studies have shown that extremist or highly negative content is promoted by the algorithms of social media platforms (Coscia & Rossi, 2022; Huszàr et al., 2022; Rathje et al., 2021). Internal studies from Facebook have also shown that 64% of extremist group joins result from the algorithm’s recommendation tools (Horrowitz & Seetharaman, 2020). This is likely because content expressing extremism and negativity draws higher engagement from users. The result, however, is a social media environment that rewards polarizing and divisive content. With financial and social incentives to create content that goes viral, these personalization algorithms are essentially ensuring that it pays to be negative and extreme.

This is not just the case for average users and media sources but for elected officials as well. Researchers found that members of Congress could receive algorithmic amplification of up to 400% when they generated polarizing content (Huszàr et al., 2022). Further, a study of social media posts from our representatives concluded that “social media may be creating perverse incentives for (members of Congress to spread) divisive content because this content is particularly likely to go ‘viral’” (Rathje et al., 2021, p.1). This has incredible implications for political polarization at the highest levels of our political system. Politicians pour millions of dollars into developing and disseminating effective campaign messaging. Now, algorithms provide the ability to reach four times the traditional audience for free just by turning to negative and extreme content. This constitutes an incredible incentivization of political polarization that will breed division in our campaigns and elections, our political discourse, and even the basic functions of our government. Essentially, polarizing content’s algorithmic amplification permeates all levels of our political society, from individual citizens to the leaders they follow.

Personalization algorithms utilized by social media also contribute to the development of partisan ‘echo chambers’ on these sites. A focus of numerous studies and experiments examining political polarization on social media, echo chambers describe the phenomenon in which users are sorted into politically homogenous groups. In these groups, users are almost solely exposed to fellow partisans, like-minded news sources, and pro-attitudinal content. A significant number of researchers have argued that these echo chambers exacerbate affective polarization by justifying and intensifying users’ existing opinions and demonizing any entity that does not share these beliefs (Barrett et al., 2021; Coscia & Rossi, 2022; Finkel et al., 2020; Levy, 2021; Rathje et al., 2021; Tokita et al., 2021).

Algorithms contribute to the creation of echo chambers because they aim to provide users with personalized content compatible with their interests and beliefs. Social media companies use massive amounts of data on users’ interests, hobbies, and beliefs, along with data from similar users and the content they enjoy, to create a highly personalized and uniform social media experience. As a by-product of these engagement-focused algorithms, social media companies inundate their users with content and accounts compatible with their worldview leading to an echo chamber of pro-attitudinal information. A study of Facebook news consumption corroborated the algorithm’s contribution to echo chambers, citing it as the strongest force associated with exposure to pro-attitudinal news (Levy, 2021, p.865). Social Media sites are actively fostering the development of polarizing echo chambers due to their personalization algorithms.

Aside from personalization algorithms, social media fosters user choices that further the development of these echo chambers. One example of this is the conduct of news sources on social media. As a result of the business models of social media and news media, news sources have adapted to the environment of echo chambers by developing increasingly biased and polarizing content to ensure maximum engagement and profit. A study on the behavior of actors on social media found that news sources “adjust their polarity (and thus the polarity of the news items they share) based on the average polarity of their audience” (Coscia & Rossi, 2022, p.3). Additionally, individual user behavior contributes to the development of echo chambers. Studies have shown that users exercise conflict avoidance by unfollowing accounts that express opinions or beliefs they deem too distant from their own, thus furthering the development of echo chambers and polarization (Coscia & Rossi, 2022; Tokita et al., 2021). Social media contributes to the development of politically homogeneous echo chambers and their polarizing repercussions through various methods.

With the understanding of how social media contributes to the development of echo chambers, it is crucial to understand how these echo chambers contribute to polarization. One polarizing effect of echo chambers is that they prevent users from hearing ideas or beliefs that challenge their opinion. Research has found that echo chambers effectively prevent users from being exposed to counter-attitudinal news or content, concluding that “they might silence more than they echo” (Tokita et al., 2021, p.1). Without exposure to other beliefs, users become unable to understand how someone could think differently than them, leading to division and the opportunity for affective polarization to swell. Research has found that as users are exposed to the echo of homogenous beliefs and denied counter-attitudinal content, their echo chambers become increasingly biased and polarized (Tokita et al., 2021). Thus, echo chambers foster growth toward extremism and intensify affective polarization.

Another polarizing aspect of echo chambers works in conjunction with the effects of algorithms. This is the algorithmic amplification of outgroup animosity. In a study of algorithms employed by Twitter, researchers found that tweets containing outgroup animosity were most likely to be promoted by the algorithms and achieve virality (Rathje et al., 2021). This is significant because outgroup animosity contributes significantly to affective polarization. Outgroup animosity supports the development of the echo chamber by unifying the ingroup and promoting animosity towards the outgroup, thus increasing affective polarization. With social media algorithms actively incentivizing content of this nature, they are directly advancing political polarization on these platforms. This has led polarization researchers to conclude that algorithms are especially polarizing within homogeneous networks [or echo chambers] (Finkel et al., 2020).

The echo chamber phenomenon is particularly noxious if considered in light of cultivation analysis theory. This communication theory contends that individuals develop a false perception of reality due to the influence of repetitive messaging within a medium. Within the medium of social media, users are subjected to repetitive, ideologically homogeneous messages and thus develop their own perception of reality. This reality is diametrically opposed to the reality developed by those on the other side of the political spectrum. This phenomenon is evident in recent issues such as the 2020 election results, Covid-19 vaccination mandates, and the events of January 6th. On issues such as these, America’s political parties have entirely different versions of the meaning of the issue. As a result, either side of the political debate becomes incapable of understanding the beliefs and motivations of the other. The resulting lack of empathy wreaks havoc on our ability for civil discourse and significantly increases affective polarization. Without the ability to empathize with each other’s beliefs or even share a common understanding of the issues at hand, we have no potential for civil discussions. We are doomed to the attitudes of affective polarization. Alternatively, studies have shown that social media users exposed to counter-attitudinal news sources were able to understand the beliefs of those they disagreed with and demonstrated lower levels of affective polarization as a result (Levy, 2021). Clearly, the separate realities echo chambers create seriously damage our ability to understand our political opposition and intensify affective polarization in our society.

The methods through which social media contributes to political polarization should be evident. Through their personalization algorithms, social media sites promote partisan news sources, silence neutral sources, and both incentivize and amplify negative and extreme content. The behaviors social media encourages and algorithms contribute to the development of ideologically homogenous echo chambers. These echo chambers inundate users with pro-attitudinal content and prevent any challenge to their beliefs, create separate realities for political opponents, and incentivize and promote content that disparages the political outgroup. As a result of these factors, social media users are increasingly ideologically divided and actively encouraged toward greater levels of affective polarization. However, with an understanding of these threats posed by social media, users should be able to resist its polarizing forces and move toward solutions to the partisan division we face.

**Repairing Our Democracy**

The threat of political polarization on social media is severe, and our challenge is immense. Thus, repairing our democracy will require a comprehensive suite of solutions aimed at all levels of our society. Social media companies, government officials, and individuals must each make changes if we plan to confront the division social media is sewing among us. We cannot wait; we must act quickly to restore our capacity for civil discourse before the ills of polarization permanently scar our democracy. While the problem before us is great, there is hope that Americans can come behind our founding ideals set forth over 200 years ago and repair the democracy we cherish.

**Social Media Solutions**

Beginning at the source of the problem, social media companies must make profound changes to address their role in exacerbating political polarization. They must make changes to their personalization algorithms to address the polarizing problems they impose, as well as their contribution to the development of partisan echo chambers. Social media companies must also rise to the significant role in political discourse their platforms have attained. These companies have a responsibility to foster healthy political discourse and transparently oversee their platforms of free speech. We all have a role in addressing political polarization, but it begins with the companies that have allowed the problem to worsen.

Starting with algorithms, there are steps social media companies could take right now to address the issue of political polarization. For example, Facebook has its aforementioned dial-turning measures that have proven to make the platform less polarizing in times of crisis. Implementing these measures permanently could significantly impact the division, negativity, and extremism plaguing their Facebook and Instagram platforms. Other platforms could also make adjustments of this nature by reducing the algorithmic amplification of content expressing negativity, outgroup animosity, or extremism. Measures such as these have proven to be effective as well. After making algorithmic alterations to reduce their platform’s recommendation of extreme content, Youtube reported that viewership of extreme content fell by 70% (Barrett et al., 2021, p.11). Social media companies have the capacity to make their algorithms less polarizing. It is time for them to step up to the plate.

Additionally, social media companies should address their algorithms’ contributions to the development of echo chambers by altering them to recommend more diverse content. This is an easy change that will foster a more healthy environment for political discourse and give users the capacity to understand different sides of the issues. A study on exposure to counter-attitudinal news found that users exposed to one to four opposing news sources saw the same reduction in affective polarization as they would if they disconnected from Facebook for two months (Levy, 2021; Allcott et al., 2020). It is remarkable that such a small change can have such significant results, and this opportunity must be taken advantage of by the corporations running social media platforms. By altering algorithms to expose users to more diverse political content, social media companies could make progress in addressing both the algorithm and echo chamber issues their platforms create.

Social Media companies must also exercise transparency in their efforts to correct their role in spreading political polarization. There are already suspicions of political bias in the operation of social media sites (Barrett et al., 2021; Huszàr et al., 2022). Thus, any alteration to how these sites promote political content must be done transparently to minimize political backlash and conflict. Additionally, social media companies should be more transparent in terms of data sharing and research. If we are to understand the full scope of social media’s impact on political polarization, these companies must allow greater access to independent researchers. With expanded research efforts, we can pursue informed solutions to political polarization and expand awareness of the issue. Transparency will be critical to the response of social media corporations.

Social Media corporations could also implement new features to address political polarization. Specifically, these new features could focus on improving social media’s growing role as a news source. One idea could be dichotomous news posts, where social media sources could provide users with coverage of the same story from new sources of differing partisan influence. This feature would allow users to see multiple sides of an issue and encourage critical thinking, thus reducing the ills of passive news consumption. Social media companies could also utilize media bias ratings from organizations such as AllSides, or Facebook’s News Ecosystem Quality ratings, to label media accounts with their political leanings. This labeling would promote greater awareness of political bias amongst users, and make it easier for them to seek out different perspectives on political issues and current events. In this age of growing information and shrinking attention spans, features that make it easier to think critically about the news we encounter could allow significant strides toward a healthier political society.

**Government and Policy Solutions**

Given the financial incentives for social media companies to maintain the status quo and even add to the political inflammation on their platforms, our government must implement policy changes to spark action on the issue. These policy changes should include new legislation and regulations around social media, funding research into social media and its impact on politics, and programs at the community level to make concrete improvements to our political discourse. Additionally, making the issue of social media and its impact on political discourse a policy priority will signal the weight of the problem we face to all actors involved.

Social media has had a transcendent rise in our society in recent years, yet our policy approach to this facet of our lives has been incongruent. There must be significant regulatory and legislative changes made in the area of social media, not just for the issue of political polarization, but harmful content, data use, privacy, and consumer protections as well. For starters, the FTC must overhaul its regulation of social media and work with stakeholders to develop enforceable standards for the industry. The corporations in charge of social media platforms have demonstrated that they cannot put the interests of our society first with the freedom they have enjoyed and thus require expanded government oversight. Congress must also pass comprehensive legislation to address the role of social media in our society. It has become a prominent part of our free speech, yet social media also has a darker side of data collection and privacy infringement that necessitates in-depth legislative solutions. There are already bills aimed at addressing this issue, such as the Online Consumer Protection Act. Congress must get behind these efforts and formulate comprehensive legislation that addresses polarization on social media along with the wide array of other social media issues.

Congress can also fund further research into the issue of political polarization on social media as well as efforts to explore free speech alternatives to social media. Funding research into the existing issue will allow a greater understanding and a more informed policy approach to the problem before us. However, there are also efforts to find alternatives to the social media business model that has contributed to the issue we face. Researchers at Stanford and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst are already exploring the creation of more civic-focused platforms for social media that could promote healthy political discourse while continuing to facilitate the exchange of ideas social media has made possible. These efforts could contribute a viable alternative to our existing polarized social media, and Congress should promote research into these possibilities.

Lastly, changes must be implemented at the local level. Local government is where policy can have the most tangible impact on the American people. State and local governments should work to provide social media training programs aimed at promoting healthier social media use and encouraging civil discourse on these platforms. Additionally, social media has become especially prominent in the lives of our youth. States should work to implement social media training into the curriculum of high school civics courses. This curriculum would prepare young Americans to have healthy social media habits and provide them with the tools to engage in a wholesome exchange of ideas. Altogether, policy implementation of this nature at the local level would promote comprehensive solutions to the threat of political polarization.

**Personal Solutions**

There are changes we can each make to have a positive impact on polarizing social media and begin to repair the division we face. Even one person can make a difference, and meaningful change will require that we all step up in some way. We can take steps to minimize the polarizing effects social media has on us, practice healthy social media use, serve as an example of civil discourse, and advocate for change to those in power. As is the spirit of our democracy, change begins with the people.

In order to lessen social media’s provocation of polarization, we must first minimize social media’s polarizing effects on ourselves. We can escape our echo chambers by seeking out news sources and content that challenge our positions and beliefs. This will promote empathy for the beliefs of those different from us and alter our personalization algorithms, dulling their polarizing effect. We can also make changes to our privacy settings to limit the data used by these algorithms. All major social media sites have options in their settings that allow users to alter the data shared and utilized by personalization algorithms. Doing so will limit our ideological isolation online and facilitate exposure to more diverse ideas and information, reducing the divisive nature of algorithms. Making such changes will allow us to minimize social media’s polarizing effects on us and thus encourage progress on this issue one person at a time.

We can continue to heal our political society through healthy social media habits and by conducting ourselves as examples of civil discourse. Healthy social media habits include media breaks, thinking critically about content, and not participating in negativity or outgroup animosity. To be examples of civil discourse, we must promote tolerance, listen to those who disagree with us and seek to understand them, and maintain awareness of our impact on social media through the content we share and create. Above all, serving as an example requires that we be active in the political discourse taking place on social media. Christopher Bail, a researcher at Duke University, writes, “The social media prism fuels status-seeking extremists, mutes moderates who think there is little to be gained by discussing politics on social media, and leaves most of us with profound misgivings about those on the other side” (Barrett et al., 2021, p.10). In order to facilitate meaningful change, we must not allow our example to be silenced by social media or drowned out by the voices of extremists. We must engage others with the civil discourse that fuels a healthy democracy through the respectful exchange of ideas.

Our democracy was built on the idea that power belongs to the people, and their voice is at the helm of political progress in this country. We must use our voices to advocate for changes to the status quo of polarizing social media and raise awareness of the issue among our fellow citizens. We can and we must reach out to our elected officials and demand action on the polarizing consequences of social media. We can and we must demand better from the corporations allowing their platforms to poison our democracy. We are the source of the revenue these companies covet, and we are the source of the power our elected officials wield. We are capable of inspiring change with our voices, and we must speak out before it is too late.

**Conclusion**

Our nation has seen an explosion of political polarization in recent years. This polarization has reached far deeper than the ideological differences characteristic of democracy and produced feelings of disdain and contempt for our political opposition. This ‘affective polarization’ has eroded our capacity for civil discourse, a foundation of healthy democratic government. As a result, our political society is unraveling. Divisive rhetoric dominates the political theater, our elected officials cannot effectively govern, citizens are losing faith in our political institutions, and we have descended into unrest. Rising political polarization has put our nation in crisis.

The rapid expansion of social media use and its rise to prominence in our political society has not been coincidental. Social media is actively contributing to political polarization and the ensuing destruction of our democracy. Countless studies, and even evidence from within social media companies, corroborates social media’s role in intensifying political polarization. Social media did not birth this phenomenon, nor is it the sole agitator of political polarization. However, the significant role of social media in exacerbating political polarization is indisputable.

Through its personalization algorithms and its creation of partisan echo chambers, social media creates a polarizing environment for its users and sews division among our political society. Social media users are bombarded with like-minded content and pushed to new levels of bias by algorithms and echo chambers. Simultaneously, they are denied an understanding of those who think differently and poisoned against them by the outgroup animosity and disparaging content that social media algorithms effectively incentivize. As a result, social media users are becoming increasingly polarized and their ability for healthy political debate is undermined, provoking the disastrous effects we are experiencing in our political society.

The polarizing threat of social media requires immediate and comprehensive change. We must pursue changes at the corporate, government, and individual levels if we hope to reverse the ills of political polarization and social media. Social media companies must make depolarizing changes to their platforms. Our elected officials must force these changes through greater oversight, comprehensive legislation, and expanded research on the subject. We can make a difference on the individual level as well, and we must make changes to our social media use and serve as an example of civil discourse for our fellow citizens. Our democracy is in trouble, but our founding principles will prevail if we rise to their defense.

There is a clear problem before our nation. Our democracy is in the process of destruction as social media exacerbates political polarization and erodes civil discourse. Yet, there is still hope for that founding ideal that, out of many, one nation can rise and stand united for the good of its citizens. The challenge is daunting, but together we can implement the necessary solutions and defend our democracy.

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