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# Technology and social polarisation

With the Cambridge Analytica scandal, it became clear how technologies such as social media and techniques such as psychological profiling can be combined in election campaigns with worrying effects. Digital forms of personalised political messaging are highly automated. They start and end with social media, which provides both the data for categorising users and the medium for targeting them with personalised messages. Messages might be designed to favour a particular candidate or to encourage widespread discord and mistrust. In either case, it could lead to more polarised societies in which citizens share less common ground and are less understanding of those with different political ideologies, attitudes to populism, or perspectives on specific topics such as immigration.

These same technologies and techniques also shape trends in news production and consumption. As newspaper sales dwindle, outlets increasingly rely upon advertising revenue generated by clicks, making extensive use of social media platforms and user profiling. Public debate increasingly occurs via these social media platforms in which citizens, politicians, companies and bots communicate directly to each other without the traditional filters of journalistic standards and editorial oversight. It has been suggested that, where citizens increasingly rely on such platforms for news, they risk entering 'filter bubbles', in which they are exposed to a narrow range of perspectives oriented around their own profiles, shielded from contrasting views, in a broad trend that could also lead to more polarised societies.

In this context, STOA launched two studies to explore the mechanisms by which these technologies and techniques may foster polarisation in Europe. One study approached the question with reference to trends in the production and consumption of news media, while the other focused on trends in political campaigning and communication strategies.

## European news media and polarisation

The [study](#), which considered the effects of technology on news production and consumption across Europe and their potential to lead to more polarised societies, was conducted by Richard Fletcher and Joy Jenkins of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. One of its key messages is how little we understand about the mechanisms that link news production and social polarisation, because evidence is patchy and findings are not always transferable between European countries.

What is clear is that the internet has created more consumer choice, to the point where most people select their own news sources based on their ideologies and preferences. For Europeans, their position on the left-right political spectrum is the strongest predictor of news choices, although their level of populism can also play a strong role, especially in Italy and Spain. More populist citizens tend to have less trust in media, while consuming more news than other citizens and relying more on commercial and tabloid outlets. An important demographic is identified in users that rely heavily on social media for their news, raising concern about 'filter bubble' effects, where users' information exposure is limited to a narrow field of perspectives that align with their pre-existing views. While intuitively reasonable, little supporting evidence for the thesis has been produced and some studies have even found that citizens are in fact exposed to a wider range of perspectives than ever before.

It is difficult to study the influence of selective news exposure on citizens' perspectives, particularly in the era of digital news consumption. Studies have found little evidence to suggest that selective exposure, or exposure to populist material, has a significant effect on the views of mainstream citizens. However, there are key exceptions to these findings at the fringes, with evidence that people who already hold extreme ideological views or attitudes to populism tend to develop even stronger perspectives when exposed to news with which they either strongly agree or strongly disagree. The authors highlight that individuals' basic interest in politics and the news might be a more important factor than the ideologies that drive their choices, as the high-choice media environment means that some users may opt-out of news consumption entirely. Such news aversion could be a worrying trend if healthy democracies rely upon citizens understanding their political system.

## Political campaigns and polarisation

This [study](#), which considered polarisation in the context of political campaigns and communications, was conducted by Lisa Maria Neudert and Nahema Marchal of the University of Oxford. It highlighted a trend towards more emotionally charged content – particularly negative material that provokes fear, hatred or disgust – in political communications. Emotion has always been part of the political strategist's toolkit, but is particularly effective in the context of social media campaigns where they tend to generate more clicks, more data and more revenue. In the run-up to the Brexit referendum, emotional material was successfully deployed to amplify specific messages and steer the media agenda. Both remain and leave campaigners deployed 'dark ads' that can only be seen by a small group of people. Closed peer-to-peer messaging services and even dating apps have been deployed to target individuals in political campaigns. While such highly charged and targeted messages may be effective, they can also escalate mistrust and tensions between groups with different perspectives and, thus, foster social polarisation.

Effective 'clickbait' not only attracts shrewd political strategists, but also entrepreneurs. During the 2016 US Presidential elections, Macedonian teenagers set up a profitable business attracting clicks through evocative, but fake, stories related to the campaign. While polarisation may not be the aim of the business model, it could be an inadvertent side effect. In other cases, polarisation has been the deliberate aim of manipulative political campaigns by hostile foreign and domestic political actors. These make use of a range of strategies including automated bots and 'dark ads' to amplify disagreement, provoke hostility between different groups, and undermine social cohesion.

While social media platforms define how information is filtered and presented to individual users, they are not always able to respond to these issues. The data is so abundant that it is unrealistic to expect humans to examine and moderate all content before it is published, as was the case in traditional newsrooms. Automated moderation has been introduced to remove content that is illegal – such as hate speech and terrorist material – or breaches company policies. These measures, however, have provoked complaints of unfair treatment from across the political spectrum and, in some cases, led to the emergence of new platforms that cater to niche political communities that may already be on the fringes of the mainstream.

Despite these worrying developments, these technical and social trends might also have some positive effects. First, some degree of polarisation can be healthy for political systems, encouraging wider democratic participation and deeper democratic engagement. Second, social media can help bring large numbers of people together around socio-political movements (such as the Arab Spring and #MeToo), or charitable causes (such as the 'ice bucket challenge'). Third, social media platforms might be able to wield their substantial power to encourage citizens to participate in elections, as Facebook claims to have done in 2010. The study also reflected on possible future trends in technology and law in the context of political communications. For example, we might expect the mobilisation of 'deepfakes', which use artificial intelligence to generate realistic artificial video and speech content, in sophisticated misinformation campaigns. On the other hand, we might also expect to see new legal standards for election campaigns, demanding transparency about the mobilisation of resources and content during election campaigns.

## Policy options

Hasty policy action that attempts to control communications directly – for example by restricting some media content or political expression – could do more harm than good, and could even have 'chilling effects' on democracy. However, both studies present policy options that could help to foster healthier digital environments and mitigate trends towards social polarisation. These are combined and further developed in the following sections.

### Policy options targeting citizens' news consumption

If the most important difference between citizens' media choices is not ideology or levels of populism but basic interest in the news, policy-makers could take action to increase the public's incidental exposure to news, their interest in current affairs, and their understanding of how news media works, by:

- Encouraging platforms and other media distributors to deploy choice modelling techniques to increase incidental exposure to news media, for example by positioning news alongside other items, as was traditionally the case in the pre-digital era of print journalism and public broadcasting.
- Promoting media and news literacy in schools and wider public discourse. Such campaigns often focus on developing critical thinking and healthy scepticism amongst citizens although, given current levels of scepticism and mistrust of news media, they may focus more on fostering understanding of how news is funded, produced and distributed.

### Policy options targeting digital divides

Digital divides, whereby groups of citizens have different levels of access to digital resources, can reinforce economic inequalities, and could also be conducive to social polarisation. These gaps could be filled by:

- Ensuring access to media for all by developing infrastructures in badly served areas and ensuring that existing infrastructures are used more effectively. Market measures could improve competitiveness and drive down prices, while regulatory measures target minimum standards for ease of access and reliability.
- Some households may never connect. Addressing gaps by providing free internet access in schools and public places such as town squares, libraries and other public buildings.
- Where affordability remains a concern, schools and libraries could provide access to IT hardware (e.g. laptops, tablets and smartphones) and services (e.g. subscription-based news media and other information sources).
- Digital literacy campaigns – from basic browsing to advanced skills – at all levels of the school system as well as adult education could target 'useful usage', which goes beyond social networks and entertainment towards a wider range of digital services, productivity tools and sources of diverse knowledge and perspectives.
- The dominance of English online presents a barrier for many users. Initiatives could promote local content, in local languages, for local consumption. Application and system services could also be tailored to better suit local contexts.

### Policy options targeting political communications

Regulations governing elections are not always well adapted to political communication in the digital age where dark third party ads, peer-to-peer messages and bots have a significant influence over debates. Policy-makers could encourage voluntary action to improve norms, while improving the enforcement of rules governing electoral campaigns, by:

- Responding to the 'dark ads' issue, which target different citizens with different information, by requiring all official campaigns materials to be recorded in a single repository that is accessible to all citizens.
- Establishing, recording and clearly presenting the source of third party ads.

- Introducing measures to counteract the presence of bots that aim only to amplify divides and provoke widespread disagreement, which could include flagging or blocking.
- Introducing robust accountability mechanisms for the sources of bots and dark ads that constitute illegal electoral interference, as well as for platforms that allow them to proliferate.
- In response to illegal activities, governments have demanded that platforms grant them access to encrypted peer-to-peer messages. For legal political messages, such policies are likely to have 'chilling effects' and face strong opposition. A lighter approach could follow the cue of social media platforms that flag links to suspicious or inaccurate content.

### **Policy options targeting news producers and major platforms**

Traditional news providers and public broadcasters struggle to transition to the digital sphere and compete with 'digital born' outlets while maintaining journalistic and editorial standards. Meanwhile, substantial power over public discourse is concentrated in a small number of international platforms.

- MEPs have already [proposed](#) a ban on profiling for electoral purposes, including the analysis of online behaviour to reveal political preferences.
- Support politically neutral public broadcasters to attract large audiences, online and offline, as they increase incidental news exposure and provide a common ground that acts as a bridge between the wide-ranging specialist sources selected by individuals.
- Forums could support traditional news organisations, 'digital born' sources and major internet platforms to exchange best practices, develop ethical codes and introduce standards for ensuring quality debate online.
- Platforms could be required to have offices located in the countries where they operate, providing a point of contact for citizens and an accountable representative for regulators.
- Demand transparency from platforms on political advertising and content moderation activities and introduce audits for compliance with data protection and electoral rules, and ensure that appropriate and effective accountability mechanisms are in place.
- Encourage cross-platform access for researchers to examine emerging technological and social trends (while respecting research ethics and data protection rights).
- Support a more competitive ecosystem of platforms by demanding cross-platform standards, interoperability, and portability of data.

### **Policy options targeting governance institutions**

Implementing and monitoring developments requires both technical and social scientific expertise in internet technologies, social media and artificial intelligence. Policy options include:

- Integrating social scientists and technical experts, enhancing digital agencies and departments, and creating new institutions where necessary.

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