
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Polarisation Predicament and Media's Influence on Partisanship

Raiaa Bhalla

Senior Researcher, The Shri Ram School, Mousari, Gurugram, Haryana

Corresponding Author: Raiaa Bhalla, **E-mail:** raiaabhalla@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the polarising effects of media's influence on the current political landscape. It comprehensively analyses- from an empirical and political approach- media such as cable news and social media. The primary objective is to emphasise the criticality of media literacy and the need for vigilance regarding the selective exposure that media can offer. It will provide insights into the future of political media communication and its role in shaping public opinion and whether that opinion can inform democratic outcomes, such as the election results of a candidate or party. This paper is working on the hypothesis that there is a direct correlation between media consumption and the alignment of public opinion with the political views that people are most exposed to online. Specifically, it postulates that individuals who are exposed to biased or one-sided media coverage are more likely to develop opinions that align with those perspectives, whereas those with diverse media exposure are more likely to form varied opinions.

KEYWORDS

Polarisation, Media, Politics, Social Media, Partisanship, Information, Echo Chambers, Discourse

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Research shows that over the previous decade, political polarisation, the divergence of political attitudes towards ideological extremes, has been increasing significantly¹. Media, among others, is a particularly outlying cause for this partisan polarisation as it is responsible for creating echo chambers that insulate people from opposing views on current events. In the case of the United States, according to a Harvard study², the direct cause of this is the rise of 24-hour private-partisan cable news over the past four decades. (Cable news refers to nothing more than the umbrella term for various television news broadcasts). The authors of the study noted comparatively that in the countries where political polarisation had fallen in the last four decades, public broadcasting received mostly public funding as opposed to private funding, thus proving the direct impact of private news on the formation of partisan views. Similarly, in India, changes in media ownership likely have played a role in this transformation, as more and more Indian media outlets have been acquired by corporate conglomerates generally run by prominent Indian families³ with individual political loyalties. In this changing media ecosystem, profit-driven organisations may openly support particular parties and sensationalise minor issues to create false dichotomies, resulting in major selective exposure among the population. In India, a country where the central axis for political homophily is religion and caste, *social media platforms* have also played an incredibly prominent role in creating major information dissemination inconsistencies.

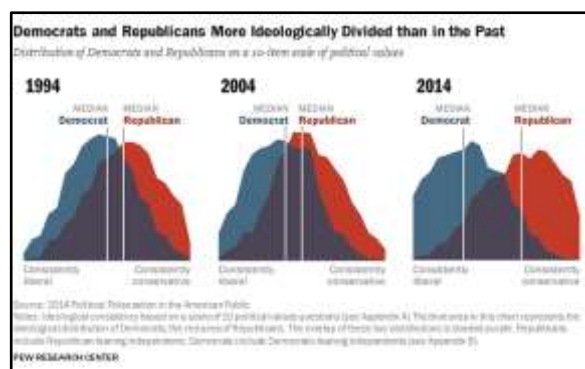
¹ <https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-01-21/polarization>

² <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/shapiro/files/cross-polar.pdf>

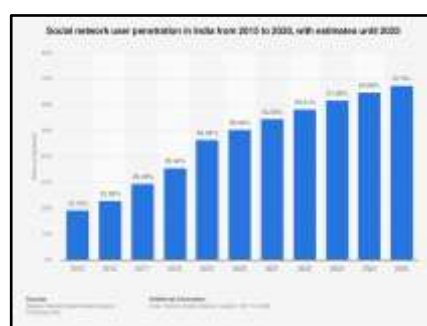
³ <https://rsf.org/en/media-ownership-monitor-who-owns-media-india>

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These platforms are distinguished by their rapid communication of content and, ultimately, news. The sheer volume of politically motivated content an Indian citizen is exposed to on average is immense: a 2019 CSDS-Lokniti and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung survey⁴ determined that one in every three Indian citizens on social media consumes some form of political content daily or regularly. Major social media platforms like Whatsapp, Twitter and Facebook claim more than 500 million users in the country, a significant amount of media penetration in urban and increasingly in rural areas as well. Political misinformation and propaganda are rampant on these platforms due to a lack of effective safeguards, with parties with specific political agendas relying on the fundamental reality that a voter bank will believe whatever they are most exposed to. According to the 2017 CSDS-Lokniti survey⁵, one-sixth of India's WhatsApp users were part of a WhatsApp group either managed by a political party or its leader. A question of ethics arises here of whether such platforms should bear ethical responsibility for such content, which will be discussed later on in the paper. The impact of each of these three platforms will also be discussed individually later on.



Other forms of journalism, such as radio, exert a very similar impact on political division in India; however, due to the introduction of digital media, their impact is far less significant. Therefore, for the purposes of this project, the primary focus will centre on cable news and social media platforms due to their wider dissemination and pronounced influence on public discourse and the formation of partisan opinions. A December 2021 report — titled 'The Future of the News in India' — noted that "a digital-first landscape is emerging for news." These platforms have witnessed a surge in adoption and engagement in recent years; the immediacy and extensive reach of cable news and social media render them particularly potent in shaping political narratives and exacerbating polarisation. We begin by analysing each of these forms of media individually.



2. Methodology

Apart from the analysis and application of multiple sources of secondary research, this project will also rely on primary data. My methodology for this project involves an essential primary approach: conducting interviews with media professionals and conducting surveys.

⁴https://www.lokniti.org/media/upload_files/Social%20media%20and%20Political%20Behaviour%20report%20new.pdf

⁵ <https://thewire.in/media/fake-news-india>

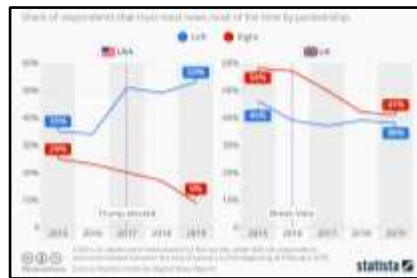
Interviews with media professionals and academics who possess extensive knowledge and experience in the field will be conducted. By engaging in in-depth conversations with this expert, the project aims to gain a deeper understanding of the media's influence on political opinion formation and how various factors such as biases, agenda-setting, and framing shape public perception. I intend to identify patterns and correlations between media consumption and political opinion, helping me draw conclusions about the impact of media on individuals' political stances.

I aim to gain comprehensive insights into the complex relationship between media and political opinion, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how media influences public perception in the political realm.

3. An Analysis of Different Forms of Media

3.1 Cable News

Cable and network television news remain the primary sources of political information for people over the age of thirty⁶. This paper posits that consuming news with a particular *slant* towards one political agenda alters the consumer's political behaviour, and the existence of slanted news could lead to a divisive feedback loop: an "echo chamber" where partisans can reinforce and strengthen their initial biases. The central new results in a Stanford paper⁷ show that in the United States, the right-wing news channel Fox News' effect in presidential elections grew from 2000 to 2008 because of an increasing viewership as well as an increasingly conservative slant on Fox News and that the cable news channels can explain an increase in political polarisation of similar size to that observed in the US population over this period. In the case of Fox News, one may argue that it caters specifically to an already right-wing electorate rather than informing the public with a rightwing slant. However, the results of this paper estimate that removing Fox News from cable television during the 2000 election cycle would have reduced the overall Republican presidential vote share by 0.46 percentage points, which could mean the difference between winning or losing a Presidential election. From this we can infer that its reach extended beyond its already right-wing viewers and succeeded in altering public opinion to an extent. Furthermore, this research estimated that cable news could increase polarisation and explain about two-thirds of the increase among the public in the United States, and we can conclude that this increase depends on both a persuasive effect of cable news and, of course, the existence of tastes for like-minded news.



These findings could have large effects not only on vote shares but can also raise or decrease an individual's response to political content not in line with their preconceived ideologies, affecting their level of political information and engagement with politics, and hence their inclination to even turn out in elections. The statista.com graph alongside shows this increasing divide and increase in partisanship in the United States as compared to the United Kingdom post significant political events in 2017 and 2016, respectively.

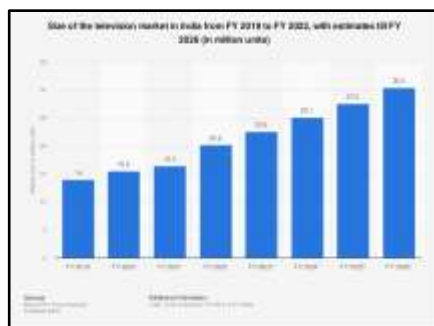
In India, electorates are more exposed to media than ever before, with NES data corroborating that the media's penetration into Indian society has increased significantly in recent years⁸ due to the proliferation of smartphones and cheap data, creating an upward trend in news/information/entertainment consumption. The percentage of voters who watch news daily went up from 19% in 1996 to 46% in 2014. The number of TV news channels increased to 393 in 2014 from 241 in 2009. According to Census of India figures, TV ownership increased from 32% in 2011 to 47%⁹.

⁶ https://www.journalism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2016/12/PJ_2016.12.15_fake-news_FINAL.pdf

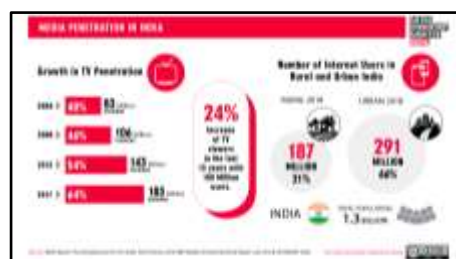
⁷ https://web.stanford.edu/~ayurukog/cable_news.pdf

⁸ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284436/india-social-media-penetration/>

⁹ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24480739?seq=4>



Given that there is statistical evidence of an increase in TV ownership, the burden of proof now falls on this paper to prove the correlation between this increase in cable news exposure to political polarisation in India. We use the following evidence to characterise the degree of division that one can attribute to slanted cable news consumption, to measure the effects of cable news on elections, and to assess the positioning strategies of the cable news channels: With this increase in access to television, there has been a simultaneous and directly proportional increase in polarised viewpoints as evidenced both in and after the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections (characterised and distinguished from previous elections by being referred to as the first 'media' elections), where the electorate was largely divided into two groups: the right-wing, conservative BJP or the left-wing Congress and were targeted by dozens of national and regional television news channels to the extent that the country witnessed a 'media blitzkrieg'. The BJP alone bought 2000 prominent spots a day across Hindi, English and regional news, general entertainment and sports channels¹⁰. As mentioned previously, most of the leading media companies are owned by large conglomerates that are still controlled by the founding families and that invest in a vast array of industries other than media. Both Republic TV and ZEE News, for instance, were previously/are still controlled by Rajya Sabha MPs: it is evident that personal ideology affects news, resulting in propaganda and disinformation for personal power or profit.



Another evidence of this phenomenon is the intense political rhetoric and instances of riots and clashes, such as the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013 and the violence in Delhi in 2020, which highlight the divided fault lines in the country, to which news coverage and social media was a significant contributor.¹¹

Comparatively, in the United States, A Pew study interestingly quantifies this disparity between consistent right-wing conservatives and left-wing liberals as follows:

Those with consistent conservative views:

1. Are tightly clustered around a single news source, far more than any other group in the survey, with 47% citing a conservative news source (Fox News) as their main source for news about government and politics.
2. Express greater distrust than trust of 24 of the 36 news sources measured in the survey. At the same time, 88% of consistent conservatives trust Fox News.
3. Are more likely to have friends who share their own political views. Two-thirds (66%) say most of their close friends share their views on government and politics.

¹⁰<https://www.hindustantimes.com/state-of-the-states/advertisement-war-to-win-lok-sabha-elections-may-cost-bjp-whopping-rs-5-000-crore/article1-1207499.aspx>

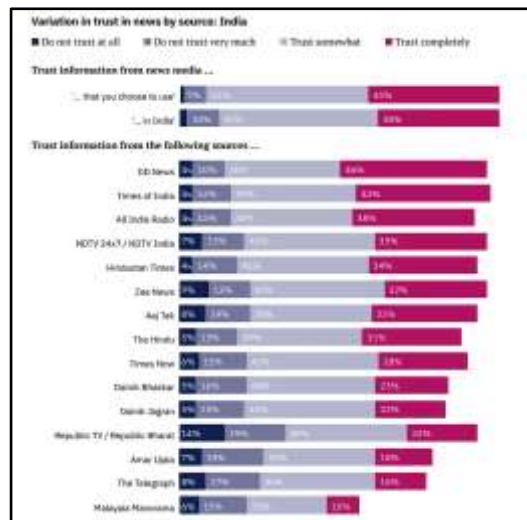
¹¹ <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/inflammatory-content-fb-was-300-delhi-riots-says-internal-report-156878>

By contrast, those with consistently liberal views:

1. Are less unified in their media loyalty; they rely on a greater range of news outlets, including some – like NPR and the New York Times– that others use far less.
2. Express more trust than distrust of 28 of the 36 news outlets in the survey. NPR, PBS and the BBC are the most trusted news sources for consistent liberals.
3. Are more likely than those in other ideological groups to block or “unfriend” someone on a social network – as well as to end a personal friendship – because of politics.

Thus, the data highlights the influence of cable news on selective exposure, confirmation bias, and the formation of echo chambers among individuals with consistent conservative and liberal views. The findings demonstrate that those with consistent conservative views tend to be ‘tightly clustered around a single news source’ and express distrust for the ‘other side’. This concentration of viewership reinforces their ideological perspectives and may perpetuate conservative narratives. Moreover, conservatives tend to convey greater levels of distrust towards most of the news sources surveyed. This heightened scepticism toward other news outlets reinforces their reliance on a single outlet, further solidifying their echo chamber. Interestingly, consistent liberals express greater trust than distrust toward a wider majority of the news outlets surveyed, including NPR, PBS, and the BBC, which are the most trusted sources among this group. This suggests that consistent liberals may be more open to varied perspectives from a broader spectrum of news sources. However, the data also reveals that consistent liberals display a lack of eagerness to engage. They are more likely to take actions such as blocking or “unfriending” someone on social media due to political differences and even ending personal friendships over politics, indicating a higher degree of ideological intolerance and a higher preference to surround themselves with like-minded individuals. Overall, the findings of this PEW study underscore how cable news can contribute to selective exposure, confirmation bias, and the formation of silos, particularly among those with consistent conservative views or consistently liberal views.

In India, there are similar consistencies in cable news consumption, as shown below:



3.2 Social Media

Scholars are increasingly concerned about the negative impact of ideological rhetoric expressed on the Internet¹² through various platforms. Among online media outlets, social media, in particular, has attracted considerable attention in regard to its potential for not only spreading disinformation and rhetoric but also for contributing to increasing sectarianism of views on the Internet as it creates networks among those sharing similar beliefs. The ideological fragmentation of these outlets contributes to the division of public opinion. Social and digital media usership has increased by 606% from 142 million to 862.08 million from 2015 to 2023¹³, and given that these platforms foster networks among people with similar beliefs, such partisanship is an evident byproduct. It is crucial to undertake an in-depth examination of individual media platforms and their unique impact on shaping ideological divisions and biases. By delving into an individual granular analysis, we can better comprehend how these platforms contribute to the propagation and reinforcement of polarised viewpoints among different segments of society.

¹² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0740624X16300375>

¹³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278407/number-of-social-network-users-in-india/>

1. Facebook:

Historically, Facebook's impact on political discourse has been significant, both in India and the United States. According to a PEW study,¹⁴ consistent conservatives on Facebook are twice as likely as the average user to see politically aligned opinions that reinforce their own views (47% vs. 23%), highlighting the presence of echo chambers. Research¹⁵ published in the journal *Science* confirms the influential role of social media platforms like Facebook in intensifying "political sectarianism". Another study¹⁶ in the journal *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* in August 2021 suggests that while social media often acts as a key facilitator to polarisation as incendiary posts tend to receive more interaction. A paper based on a study of over 17,000 Americans¹⁷ found that Facebook's content-ranking algorithm limits users' exposure to news outlets with contrasting viewpoints. Internal Facebook documents, as reported by *The Wall Street Journal*¹⁸, reveal that the company's management has rejected all proposed reforms despite recognizing the harmful effects of its platform. The algorithm was modified in 2018 with the intention of addressing these issues; however, it inadvertently increased divisiveness on the platform even further. Furthermore, a Facebook study indicates that polarisation extends to the social network itself. On average, a Facebook user has approximately five politically like-minded friends for every friend with differing views.

An internal Facebook report¹⁹ reported the experience of a test user in India who created a new account to see what it was like to experience Facebook as an Indian living in Kerala, India. For the next three weeks, the account operated by a simple rule: it followed all the recommendations generated by Facebook's algorithms to join groups, watch videos and explore new pages on the site. The resulting content was an inundation of hate speech, misinformation and celebrations of violence. This test user symbolises the experience of over 340 million users in the country. In July 2020, the Delhi Minorities Commission released a report²⁰ on how hate speech on social media, and specifically Facebook, fuelled the religious violence in North East Delhi during that year. India represents Facebook's largest market, amplifying the challenges the company faces in understanding and addressing its political impact, which it clearly recognizes as its responsibility, with Facebook's Public Policy Director, Shivnanth Thukral, explaining that if it is clear that certain content violates the platform's community guidelines, it is taken down immediately. In case of user complaints, they are mandated to acknowledge within 24 hours and have to respond within 14 days.

2. WhatsApp: WhatsApp is India's most downloaded application. With more than 200 million active users—more than the combined population of France, Germany, Austria, and Poland—WhatsApp has emerged as a powerful political tool. In recent years, political parties in India have focused on increasingly leveraging WhatsApp to reach various constituencies. In such an environment, it is essential to study the quality of information circulating on these platforms to voters as they exercise their franchise. An Oxford study²¹ collected and analysed data from a total of 116 public WhatsApp groups across different parties. The results proved that the proportion of polarising political news and information in circulation over social media in India is worse than all of the other country case studies that the researchers had analysed, except the US Presidential election in 2016. As mentioned previously, an important example of this is the spread of disinformation and fake news that became a trigger for Muzaffarnagar riots in Uttar Pradesh just eight months ahead of the federal elections²². In many ways, WhatsApp is an ideal medium for spreading fake news and rumours due to its technological features of the application such as free usage, end-to-end encryption (which makes it difficult to trace the origin of a message), its support for multimedia content, ease of use and forming groups for communication. Since the content shared by individuals or in groups comes from someone known, there is a strong tendency to trust the source. The other factors that contribute to its position are the usage pattern, especially in India. Given that a large number of users from urban areas are first time Internet users and thus not cognizant of fake news or practised in media literacy, they become easily convinced that any news on the application is true, particularly with the case of the 'forwarding' technology and since there are limited mechanisms to verify or regulate the content being shared. One of the strengths of the application is the use of less reliance on the literary strength of a user. A user could communicate in any media (text, audio, video or pictures). This has also caused its popularity among large sections of Indian society, which do not have good literacy rates and access to/information about other media and sources to verify the news. Later in the paper, Professor Rahul Verma

¹⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>

¹⁵ <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abe1715>

¹⁶ [https://www.cell.com/trends/cognitive-sciences/fulltext/S1364-6613\(21\)00196-0](https://www.cell.com/trends/cognitive-sciences/fulltext/S1364-6613(21)00196-0)

¹⁷ <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/aer.20191777>

¹⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039>

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/23/technology/facebook-india-misinformation.html>

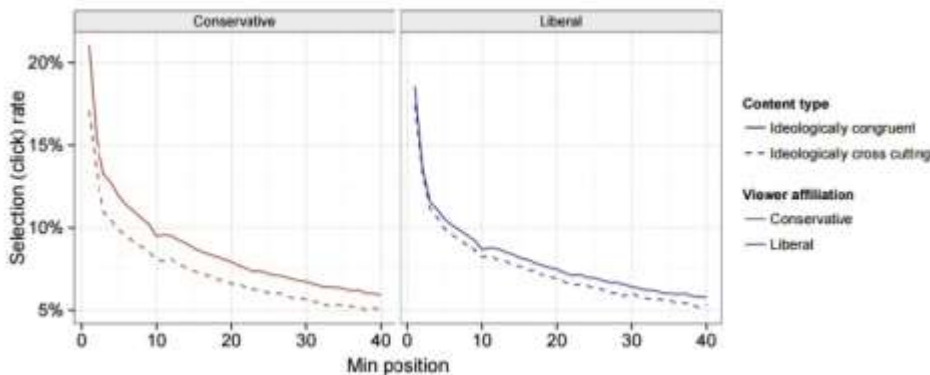
²⁰ <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/delhi-minorities-commission-fact-finding-report-delhi-riots-bjp-jamia-shaheen-bagh>

²¹ <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2019/05/India-memo.pdf>

²² https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/74603/ssoar-mediawatch-2018-1-farooq-Politics_of_Fake_News_How.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

of Ashoka University explains the exact proliferation process of media, beginning with the upper echelons of society and trickling down to the masses.

3. Twitter: Among all the social mediums, Twitter is the most pivotal online platform extensively used for political debate. 69% of the top 10% of most prolific tweeters on the platform say they have tweeted about politics²³, and one-third²⁴ of all tweets from U.S. adults are political. "Twitter has emerged as a key platform on which anyone with a smartphone can engage in political discourse," observed Michelle Nguyen in her article *Twitter's Role in Politics* in The Northwestern Business Review. She noted a large cause of this is economic access: while a TV ad can cost millions of dollars, a single tweet can reach the same number of people just as quickly for a negligible fraction of the cost. Given the ease of widespread communication with the click of a button and the app's worldwide popularity, a majority of Indian politicians, parties, and organisations now have Twitter handles and use them to disseminate sensationalised and provocative news. An Indian study²⁵ showed a clear tendency of homophily was observed in the retweet networks on Twitter. Same party mentions, which reflect support and agreement, were significantly higher than cross-party mentions, which reflect disagreement.



4. In another study titled "*The echo chamber effect on social media*"²⁶, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, the researchers analysed more than 100 million posts collected between 2010 and 2018 about controversial topics such as abortion, gun control, and vaccination. They found that compared with Reddit users, Twitter users were more likely to interact with information disseminated by users with similar viewpoints. The results showed that the aggregation of users in homophilic clusters dominate online interactions on Twitter. In particular, the topic of abortion on Twitter shows a strong correlation between the leaning of a user and the average leaning of their nearest neighbours.

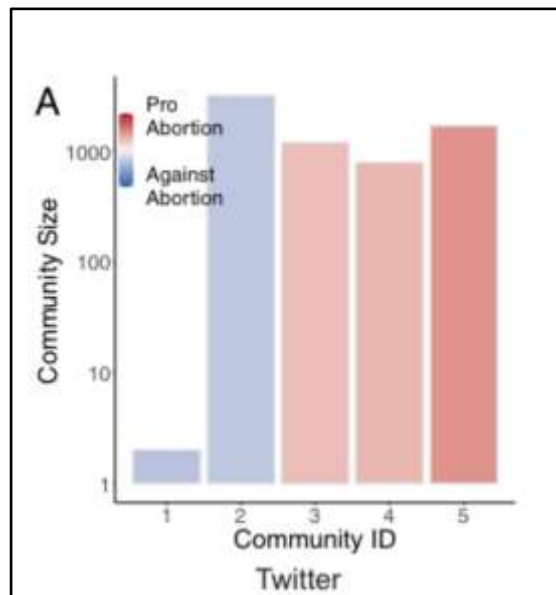
Thus, in both the United States and India, Twitter breeds political homophily through algorithmic means, which are conducive to the formation of echo chambers through selective sharing and amplification, anonymity, campaigns, media manipulation and disinformation.

²³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/04/24/sizing-up-twitter-users/>

²⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/16/politics-on-twitter-one-third-of-tweets-from-u-s-adults-are-political/>

²⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9340722/>

²⁶ <https://www.pnas.org/doi/epdf/10.1073/pnas.2023301118>



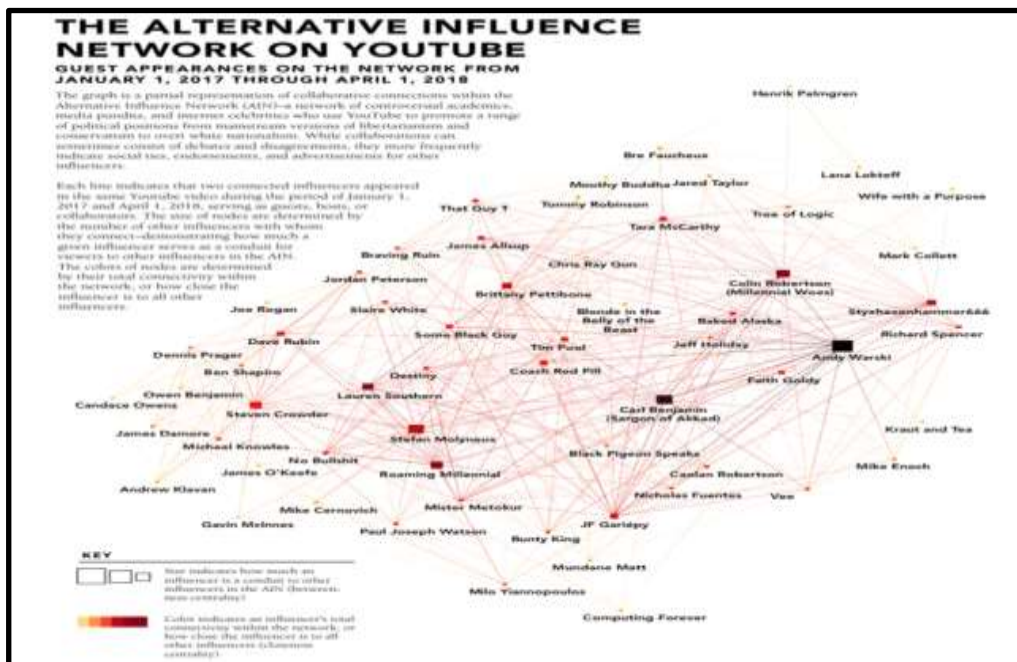
5. Case studies in other Social Media: In a video-essay on Youtube, which has gained significant traction on the media platform²⁷, social-science and media commentator Olivia "Liv" Sun recounts her own experience with indoctrination into the far-right; a polarisation that was created due to the selective media exposure she received on Youtube. Sun's narrative sheds light on the influential role of selective media exposure encountered on YouTube, contributing to her political homophily. Her account underscores the significance of algorithms and recommendation systems that prioritise engagement, as Sun found herself unwittingly trapped in an echo chamber where the content she consumed predominantly reinforced her existing views with reactionary and incendiary videos of far-right commentators. The persuasive nature of YouTube's recommendation system serves as a potent catalyst for ideological divisions and echo chamber creation. Sun explains that this constant barrage of recommended videos, as well as the ideology-reinforcing comments on these videos, affected her political opinions to the extent that her political views completely pivoted from left-leaning and liberal to far-right and conservative. This aligns with research in media studies, emphasising the interplay of selective exposure and confirmation bias in shaping individuals' media consumption habits and deepening political polarisation. Sun's experience is not unique. It is a common example of the alt-right pipeline, also referred to as the alt-right rabbit hole, a conceptual framework that explains the phenomenon of internet radicalization towards the alt-right movement. It elucidates a process wherein individuals progressively become exposed to alt-right or similar far-right ideologies as a result of consuming provocative right-wing political content. This model suggests that this exposure occurs due to the interconnected nature of political commentators and online communities, enabling individuals to come across more extreme groups. The most well-documented manifestation of this process is observed on YouTube (like Sun recounted), where it is facilitated through an "Alternative Influence Network", in which various right-wing scholars, pundits, and internet personalities interact with one another to boost the performance of their content. These algorithms recommend content similar to what users engage with, inadvertently leading them down rabbit-holes of similar content. Furthermore, the alt-right pipeline has been linked to tragic incidents such as the Christchurch mosque shootings, wherein a far-right extremist cited the internet as instrumental in shaping his beliefs. The informal nature of radicalization within this pipeline allows individuals to lead seemingly normal lives offline while harbouring extreme ideologies. Additionally, harassment campaigns against perceived opponents of the alt-right movement are another common consequence of radicalization.

In an Op-Ed in the Washingtonian titled 'What Happened After My 13-Year-Old Son Joined the Alt-Right,' an anonymous author's recollection highlights the power of selective exposure to online content on Reddit in shaping her son's ideological transformation at a tender age. The allure of anonymity and a sense of belonging within alt-right communities created an environment conducive to his radicalization, with online spaces such as Reddit forums serving as information bubbles that reinforced extremist beliefs and limited exposure to contrasting viewpoints. The author's son warns others

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3r01BruBok>

to be sceptical of such exclusionary online communities. He blames big tech, media companies and their algorithms for contributing to the problem of radicalization.

Therefore, social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and others have had a significant impact on political polarisation. While these platforms do provide opportunities for information sharing, community building, and public discourse, they also possess characteristics that can exacerbate division in society. The algorithms employed by these platforms, coupled with personalised recommendations, contribute to chambers where individuals are primarily exposed to content they already agree with. This limited exposure to diverse viewpoints hampers the exchange of ideas and fosters an environment where people are less likely to engage in civil discourse. The selective sharing and amplification of content on social media platforms further reinforce pre-existing biases and contribute to the spread of biased or misleading information. This phenomenon is particularly concerning when it comes to the sharing of false or manipulative information during political campaigns, as discussed above, as it can distort public perceptions and deepen polarisation. The anonymity and impersonal nature of interactions on social media platforms can also lead to more aggressive behaviour and the propagation of extreme viewpoints. Hostile discussions, trolling, and harassment have become more prevalent, making it increasingly difficult for individuals with differing opinions to find common ground and engage in constructive dialogue. Moreover, the viral nature of hashtags, trends, and campaigns on these platforms can contribute to the formation of opposing camps, where individuals with different political perspectives engage in heated debates that further entrench their positions. This phenomenon intensifies political polarisation and creates an atmosphere of "us versus them," creating false dichotomies and hindering the potential for finding common solutions to societal challenges. While it is important to acknowledge that social media platforms alone do not create political polarisation, they serve as powerful amplifiers and catalysts of existing divisions. The responsibility lies not only with the platforms themselves but also with users to foster a more balanced and constructive online discourse. The following interviews with professionals in the media and political science spheres discuss efforts to promote media literacy, critical thinking, and fact-checking, which are crucial in mitigating the negative effects of social media on political polarisation.



4. Interviews

An interview was conducted with the Indian TV and print journalist, entrepreneur and author Anubha Bhonsle. She has worked as Executive Editor at CNN-News18, where she was also a prime-time anchor. She started her career in 1999 and has worked with several news organisations, including The Indian Express, Zee News, NDTV and the Citizen Journalist Show. Bhonsle has also researched the role of gender and race in America and has performed in-depth reporting on marginalised people within India from Kashmir to Uttar Pradesh. She is the founder of Newsworthy. Studio, a digital storytelling platform. Additionally, she is the author of Mother, Where's My Country and is a Fulbright Humphrey fellow as well as a research fellow at the Georgetown Institute for Women.

'Given your extensive experience in the media industry, do you believe that cable news/social media forms an echo chamber, where people are mostly exposed to views that they already agree with?'

AB: Cable news and social media platforms are no longer two ends of the spectrum. With larger digital penetration, cable news content will also be consumed digitally on social media platforms as well as standalone. Increasingly large sections of the Indian television media are copy-cat machines, churning out harmful content garbed as news discussions. These stations leave large parts of the country uncovered— as ‘news deserts’ devoid of any real coverage of their issues and challenges. When large sections of the media- whether print, online, video or audio -fill their broadcast hours with what would be considered small, minutiae issues that are unidirectional towards one narrative, one could argue that people have no choice but to consume the content that is offered to them. There is an echo chamber that exists across ideologies. People do tend to consume content that they are likely to agree with. The core tenet of journalism, though, is not to offer people what they agree with but to strive for the most factual, complete and honest narrative. With social media platforms now turning out to be potent vehicles for distributing one-sided narratives, there is a fundamental factor that needs to be acknowledged: the tyranny of the algorithms where you are served more and more information that strings along with your views, likes, interests that platforms already know about you. This makes the job harder for a citizen to be truly informed, irrespective of what their ideology or views are.

Q2. In our country, as well as abroad, political polarisation is increasing significantly. People are becoming more intolerant towards political parties that they do not support and becoming extremely aligned to a single ideology. What do you think is the cause of this?

AB: There are many factors that have allowed for a situation where it has become increasingly different to even hear an opposing view. That is the genesis of hardening of positions, whether political, ideological or voting preferences. The factors are as follows-

1. Social media has allowed us to be more vocal and brutally honest about our opinions and experiences. Face-to-face conversations allow for more nuance, body language, and a sense of discomfort in the other person. Social media eliminates all of this.
2. Social media, for all its benefits, allows us to meet people who think like us more easily. This allows both candle-light marches for issues we agree with but simultaneously allows people we disagree with to form their own communities.
3. There is an ideological churn (the continuous and dynamic process of transformation and reevaluation of ideology within a society that implies that ideologies are not static or fixed) in India and across the world.
4. In many parts of the world, there is a rise of right-wing leaders, conservative groups, etc., gaining influence. Social media makes saying the unthinkable far easier.
5. Social media caters to a dystopian world built on information served by algorithms, so you are led to believe a version of the world that is far from dynamic, diverse and different.

Q3. Does media, particularly the selective exposure that it offers, play a role in this polarisation?

AB: The media, owned, led, and appropriated by political parties, plays a crucial role. However, any explanation or theory that considers either the rise of selective exposure via social media or the rise of populist forces alone is insufficient. Both are necessary. Ideologies are not all a function of media construction. These have to be understood in a larger context to see what conditions existed on the ground that have allowed people to gravitate towards “exclusionary forces.”

Q4. Social Media functions on the principle of showing users content that they are most likely to agree with and interact with, how will this affect the political opinions the population chooses to see and believe?

AB: The reality is that social media presents us with the opinions and values we want to see. Twitter users actively choose who they want to follow. The Facebook algorithm encourages users to remain on the platform by showing them the information they are most likely to be interested in. This is a business mode of attention. Users are complacent about the business model and the information walls this model allows them to be caged in, as well as inform their world view. *As long as we rely on social-media sites to curate what we read, we allow them to control what we think.*

Q5. A study found that people with consistently conservative bias or significantly liberal views express a distrust for news channels on the other side. How do you think this bias can be overcome and we can create better and more diverse news consumption habits?

AB: I think the first point I want to make is that I realise it is an unfair ask on the part of the citizens to make them bear the responsibility of ensuring a more diverse media consumption. It is unfair because news is also a product, and citizens should be able to expect the best product available. In an information economy where we are exposed to so much, there is a responsibility on individuals to add more hygiene and discernment to their own consumption habits in this attention economy. The loudest, most sensational, and emotional things always attract attention. There is a subset of the attention economy that news organisations try to capture, often forgetting to foreground public interest and foregrounding sensationalism instead. Journalists must ensure they don't make a mockery of people's dignity, identity and privacy. So, how can a citizen navigate this?

One way is to add more diverse elements to your new diet. If you are left-aligned, take a look at right-leaning perspectives as well. Add more discipline to your news consumption. People don't need to consume news 24 hours a day, so be mindful of how much and when you choose to consume it. Curate a news feed that takes into account your own biases. Recognize that algorithms may be feeding your biases and actively work against them. Another important way to do this is to support small independent media outlets. Consume work from niche news sources that focus on specific areas as they can provide a more grounded and nuanced picture. For instance, if I want to learn more about the environment, I should consume news from a source with a focus on that topic as it is more equipped to educate me without any slant or bias. When looking at any news material, have your own filters on. The question is whether there are only men being quoted, whether gender is being overlooked, or if certain regions like Delhi or Bombay dominate while large parts of India remain invisible in bylines. Look for intersectionality and seek out diverse perspectives. I often emphasise this to journalists as well: Be mindful of representation, gender inclusivity, and intersectionality in your reporting.

Q6. Among online media outlets, social media has attracted considerable attention in regards to its potential for not only spreading disinformation and propaganda, but also for contributing to increasing polarisation of views on the Internet as it creates networks among those sharing similar beliefs. What responsibility does a journalist have to prevent this kind of ideological fragmentation?

AB: The pillars of responsibility of a journalist haven't changed with technology. Personally, I do not believe that journalists can operate in a landscape completely oblivious to the shifting forms and formats. Being agile does not mean compromising on journalistic value. Ask yourself, "Is this in the public interest or not?" and you'll always get a clear answer. The concept of complete facts or complete truth is also slightly flexible, but at that point, have you tried your best to get this? As for the next responsibility, I have a slightly different outlook than others. People say you should always try to get both sides of the story, but I have a different viewpoint. For example, if I say it's raining and you say it's not, I shouldn't quote both sides; I should open the window and see for myself if it's raining. I should unpack and provide informed facts: it is not raining, it hasn't rained for five hours, and it is not going to rain for the next three hours. I don't think that simply quoting both sides without investigation is good journalism. Your craft is to see and connect both sides and put out something that is completely true.

Technology has also changed how people consume news. Be old school but be agile in adapting to changing technology and consumption patterns. In these two words, there is constant discussion on SEO. I don't think it's a bad thing, and I think disregarding it is bad as well. However, don't become a slave to it. Good journalists are failing to get their work seen because they are producing things that are stale and boring. I think you can produce great journalism in an engaging manner.

These new forms and formats, along with algorithms, have amplified the worst. I've seen stupidity go viral, and the virality has become the focus of that news organisation. But I don't think you should put out a completely stupid piece of media, either. These platforms have ended up freezing the frenzy further, and the good, strong work is following the old story. I do think it has changed, and we need to do good journalism in a better way.

A second interview was conducted with Professor Rahul Verma, a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Ashoka University and a Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research. He has a PhD in Political Science from the University of California at Berkeley. His book, co-authored with Pradeep Chhibber, *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* (OUP: New York, 2018), develops a new approach to defining the contours of what constitutes an ideology in multi-ethnic countries such as India. His research interests include voting behaviour, party politics, political violence, and the media. He is a regular columnist for various news platforms and has published papers in *Asian Survey*, *Economic & Political Weekly*, and *Studies in Indian Politics*.

Q1. To what extent does the media we consume influence the formation of our political opinions, and what other factors contribute to the development of these opinions?

RV: It's hard to say exactly how significant of a role it plays, but we do know that people consume all kinds of information through the media. There is a spectrum of media, from television and newspapers to now, modern media such as social media platforms. With social media, the biggest change is that the penetration of this medium into the everyday lives of people and the pace with which information can be shared has increased dramatically. Ten years back, around 2010, social media platforms like Facebook and Whatsapp were still in the process of expanding; before that, I would say less than one third of the population was consuming information through news channels and newspapers. The penetration pattern of social media is the same as it is for traditional media, where the top portion of society: urban, educated, upper class, upper caste males- the top half of society- gets used to these mediums first and then the slow penetration into the rest of the public begins. Social media has now crossed that upper crust and is available to all.

TV penetration has also increased. 20 years ago, people didn't have access to what we call 'cable.' In that sense, access to information, as well as the number of people who use these mediums to access information now, has rapidly changed. Within the last 15 years, what's also changed is that people no longer switch between news channels. Earlier, if I was watching NDTV and advertisements started playing, I would switch channels to something like India Today. What seems to be happening now is that as parties and identities are becoming stronger, an effect of polarisation, people are sorting out which news outlets they choose to watch. So now, if ideologically I am on the centre-left spectrum, I will rarely cross lines. People in our homes who watch NDTV likely won't watch Zee News. Those who watch Zee News won't watch NDTV. This is exactly why some would argue that we are getting into echo chambers; we like to hear only what we want to hear. That seems to also be happening on Whatsapp groups where we engage only with much more like-minded people. Your engagement on political and social questions is much more with people who share your worldview rather than those who would disagree, which is why people of a younger age group do not engage with family members on socio-political questions because they assume that their relatives will not share similar views. At the end of the day, media is a medium, and its effect in shaping your views is only partial. We are forming identities not just because of media but other factors such as friend circles, socialisation and personal preferences. I see media as a *catalyst rather than a cause*.

Q2. Social Media functions on the algorithmic principle of showing users content that they are most likely to agree with and interact with. What are the dangers of this echo chamber, and how can we become more aware, informed, and increase our media literacy with our media consumption?

RV: It is difficult. Prejudices are latent. Even after lots of education, people continue to have all kinds of phobias and biases, which is why I don't think it's only a question of media literacy. It is about belief systems. How do you change belief systems? It's hard unless someone is open to verify themselves and fact-check themselves. But I don't want to be a cynic; I think it's important for young people to be optimistic, and definitely, in some cases, biases can be removed.

Q3. A study found that people with consistently conservative bias or significantly liberal views express a distrust for news channels on the other side; what are the dangers of this bias to our democracy?

RV: We all have our belief systems. In our belief systems, we often look the other way on many issues. That happens on both sides of the aisle; the trouble at the moment is we are not ready to have conversations across the aisle. We reduce any sort of conservative view as being prejudiced or bigoted. And the same thing happens on the conservative side, where views from the liberal side are dismissed for being out of touch and not understanding traditions and family value systems. We are not making efforts to figure out where these views are coming from. On both sides, there are some extreme and very ignorant viewpoints, which have no basis, but apart from that, there are lots of good points on both sides, and we are not even ready to discuss those things, and that, to me lies at the heart of the problem. This is why I don't think increasing media literacy and fact checking will entirely solve the issue that you are talking about.

Q4. As modern media becomes more and more prominent in our daily lives, what do you believe the future of this intersection of politics and media will entail?

RV: This is very open-ended. I think all these forms of media also have very positive effects in every sphere of our lives; for example, we are now much more connected with others near and far. There are, of course, things we have forgotten. We no longer write long letters; instead, we can message people easily, transfer money easily, and we get to see and share lots of information. For political parties also, the media has been very helpful in mobilising electorates and in sharing their viewpoints. Any analysis of media should not only be looking at the negative effects it might have as there are multiple positive aspects as well, which is why their penetration has been so much and at such a fast pace. The communication and media world, from a political party viewpoint, has already become integrated. I don't think any political party plans a campaign strategy without putting a large share of their resources into using these platforms to mobilise their electorates. I believe that in the future, politics will have a lot more. I don't want to say dependence on media, but it will become far more integrated as we move on. This doesn't mean traditional forms of mobilisation by political parties will become unimportant; formats such as the newspaper still maintain their relevance. I also would also like to point out that with all these algorithms and manipulative tactics, at the end of the day, they can only make a marginal difference to the final outcome: you can't just win elections by bombarding the media with messages. As a political party, you need to have a sound ideological platform, perform well in power, and have a line of leadership which is charismatic and appealing. Media is simply another medium which has become important, but it is not the final driving factor every single time.

5. Conclusion

A majority of respondents to a survey conducted alongside this paper mentioned socialisation in the form of mindshare, conversations with their peers, friends, family or teachers and general opinion as their source of political information prior to the media explosion in Indian politics. Other common responses included traditional and modern media forms like newspapers and television. Post 2014, media has become the main platform for such socialisation, resulting in 100% of respondents agreeing to the statement that they receive political information through it in some form.

After conducting both independent research and collecting primary data via interviews with professionals and surveys, the project focused on examining the effect of both modern media platforms (such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter) and traditional media on political polarisation. The findings and analysis indicate the following significant conclusions:

1. **Traditional Media's Influence on Political Polarisation:** The research highlighted the impact of traditional media outlets on political polarisation. While the dominance of modern platforms is apparent, traditional media in the form of journalism, newspapers and some forms of cable news still hold influence and contribute to polarisation. Biases in reporting, selective coverage, the creation of 'news deserts' and sensationalism can shape public opinion and reinforce partisan divisions. Additionally, the project identified a correlation between media consumption habits and political polarisation, with individuals gravitating towards media outlets that align with their ideological leanings through statistics as well as through survey results and the opinions of media professionals.
2. **Modern Media Platforms and Political Polarisation:** The project revealed that modern media platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and the ideology-rampant Youtube, play a crucial role in shaping political polarisation as 100% of survey respondents revealed that they view political information on these platforms. These platforms offer individuals the ability to express their opinions, share information, and connect with like-minded individuals. However, this unrestricted, algorithmic communication creates echo chambers of opinion. This phenomenon intensifies polarisation by reinforcing existing views and reducing exposure to diverse perspectives.
3. **Social Media Amplification of Extreme Views:** The project revealed that social media platforms have a tendency to amplify extreme views, thereby intensifying political polarisation. Due to the algorithmic design of these platforms, content that evokes strong emotions or controversy tends to receive higher engagement and visibility. This amplification effect can lead to misinformation and the dissemination of extreme content, further dividing individuals along ideological lines. The project emphasised the need to address this amplification bias within social media algorithms such as Facebook and Twitter to mitigate the impact on political polarisation and promote more balanced discourse.
3. **Bias and Filter Bubbles:** The paper explored the tendency of individuals to seek out and accept information that confirms their existing beliefs while dismissing or discrediting opposing viewpoints. This bias is amplified by the algorithms used by modern media platforms, which prioritise content based on user's preferences, creating filter bubbles that further limit exposure to diverse perspectives.
4. **Distrust in Media:** The project found that trust in media institutions influences the level of political polarisation. The erosion of trust in the 'other side' fueled by perceptions of bias and misinformation is synonymous with the rise of media sources that cater to specific ideological viewpoints. This fragmentation of trust exacerbates sectarianism as individuals gravitate towards sources that reinforce their preconceived notions, further isolating them from alternative viewpoints.

6. Recommendations for Mitigating Polarisation

Based on the paper's findings, several recommendations can be made to mitigate political polarisation:

1. **Promoting Media Literacy:** Journalist Anubha Bhonsl recommended that enhancing media literacy and mindfulness can equip individuals with the skills to critically evaluate information, identify bias, and recognize the dangers of echo chambers. This empowers individuals to consume media more discerningly and seek out diverse and alternative viewpoints.
2. **Algorithmic Transparency and Regulation:** Encouraging transparency in algorithms used by social media platforms can help users understand and mitigate the impact of filter bubbles. Additionally, implementing responsible regulations to combat the spread of misinformation and reduce algorithmic bias can be instrumental in promoting a more balanced media ecosystem.
3. **Diverse and Inclusive Media Representation:** Promoting diversity and inclusivity in media representation can help counter polarisation by providing a broader range of perspectives and fostering empathy and understanding across ideological divides. Professor Rahul Verma recommended the encouragement of more discourse across the aisle and across different political spectrums. Promoting civil discourse both online and offline can foster respectful engagement and constructive dialogue among individuals with differing opinions. Platforms and communities can play an active role in encouraging productive conversations and discouraging inflammatory rhetoric.

In conclusion, the project's research indicates that both modern and traditional media platforms contribute to political polarisation. The findings highlight the role of bias, distrust in media, echo chambers and the absence of media literacy. By implementing the recommendations outlined above, there is potential to mitigate polarisation and foster a more informed and inclusive public discourse.

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