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Evaluating the role of social media in extreme political polarization

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Introduction

Social media is one of the biggest developments of our century. It is now an essential part of our lives, but most importantly, our significant source of information. Social media has taken over the role of television, newspapers, and traditional ways of communicating the news, giving more power to unverified individuals and their views. With its arrival, political polarization found its way to further influence us and our decisions. But what exactly is the role of social media when it comes to extreme political polarization, and what influence does it bring to the world we live in? How does it affect us and the political choices made by politicians around the world? The rise of social media gave politicians more freedom to (un)controllably spread their biased ideology, but what dangers does it bring? Polarisation isn't any new to us, but nowadays, with the rapid rise of AI, it becomes harder and harder to separate real news from rage baits. These deepfakes and automated bots are blurring the line between authentic and manipulative political communication.

As social media is now our first hand when it comes to news and gives us a wide variety of information, it is important to address the dangers it brings to democracy. Content is specified under an individual's wishes; this personalized content counts up to polarization, as the user will mostly see what they want to see. This has an impact on our personal political views, blocking news that doesn't align with our preferences and further influencing the political choices we make, for example, during elections. It is important for all of us to stay critical, as our minds are fragile and easy to persuade. This research report will provide more insight into social media and extreme polarization, hoping to preserve the democratic potential of both phenomena.

Definition of Key Terms

Polarization

Polarization is the shift of political party members and supporters away from the center towards ideological extremes, where two parties are opposing each other with different ideologies and ideas.

Confirmation bias

Confirmation bias is the tendency of people's minds to seek out information that supports the views they already hold and block information that doesn't.

Partisan

A partisan is an individual, a strong supporter of a party, cause, or person. They often characterize extreme polarization and divide society by two opposing ideologies.

Deepfakes

Deepfakes are fake, often AI-generated videos of a person in which their face or body has been used to spread false information or for malicious purposes.

Framing

Framing is a method used by the media, where it focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning.

Propaganda

Biased information is used to promote a political point of view.

Zero-sum view

A zero-sum view is a view where one person's gain means another's loss. It is the belief that one party's gains can only be obtained at the expense of another party's losses.

Troll farms

A troll is someone who provokes others by raising controversial topics. A troll farm or factory is an organization that is employed in order to conduct disinformation propaganda on the internet. They achieve their goals through fake news and hate speech by creating fake accounts, websites, and posts and responding to others. Such farms take action in a planned manner, which is also more reliable and effective than bots.

Ideology

Ideology is a set of ideas, beliefs, and opinions of an individual. It often refers to political beliefs or represents culture; some examples are communism, capitalism, Marxism, or socialism.

General Overview

Polarization isn't a new phenomenon, widely spread political views have been part of politics all around the world for centuries. Political parties have various views, and their ideology differs from one another. Polarization occurs when the differences are so large that they're ideally opposing each other; it is the ideological distance between the two opposing parties, an ideological divide within the society. We are attracted to views that are similar to our own, and so we make political decisions. This political polarization can be beneficial while making it easier for us to determine which views we agree with and which we don't, giving us a fair choice. Polarization can also help, as we see in resolutions, where various opinions clash to find a solution. Movements advocating human rights, like Black Lives Matter in 2020 or the second-wave feminism movement in the 1960s, often emerge from polarized viewpoints. However, it does become a problem when it's making it harder to tolerate or accept views that are opposite and swift away from the center towards ideological extremes. This kind of political polarization is already extreme between the political elites and opposing parties, as we see between Republicans and Democrats in the US. These elites and parties combined are a danger to the general public and fragile to news, especially through social media.

Extreme polarization

Political polarization becomes disadvantageous when the general public shifts into extremism. This doesn't only affect politics but also private life, as such, extremists see the ideology as a lifestyle rather than just policy ideas. This leads to hostility between 'all those who disagree,' harming democracy, where everybody should be able to have different views and opinions and the freedom to do so. The common ground is almost impossible to find, making a place for hostility and lack of trust, and in extreme cases, it can even lead to social unrest and violence. Extreme polarization undermines democracy and democratic institutes, as the supporters of one party, often characterized as partisan individuals, view the opposing side as dangerous to democracy, believing only their ideology is perfect. Democracy cannot exist without opposing views and the freedom to express them respectfully. This leads to political instability as the opposing parties try to 'eliminate' each other through political and legal means. This happens when the parties see shared government

institutions as a tool to win to achieve dominance rather than a system to find compromises, as we saw during the Storming of the Capitol in the U.S. in 2021.

Social media impact

It is important to remember that humans are also prone to confirmation bias, meaning we seek and approve information only if it aligns with our own beliefs and, at the same time, block opposing views. With the rise of social media like Instagram, X, and TikTok, we've changed the way we get our daily information. Although newspapers and authorized media also tend to lean towards some ideological beliefs using framing methods, such as changing or consciously not using certain words, it is most likely for them to stay as neutral as possible, trying to inform us rather than convince us. Social media gives the right to all users to operate with almost no editorial oversight from authorized institutions, giving them the freedom to easily spread misinformation since it's the users that generate content. As we seek information that falls to our own beliefs, we encourage selective exposure to information through algorithms. This makes it harder for us to believe other news websites, making the user hear only one side of the story. It is also more common for us to see viral content, which is more sensational and easier to believe. The Internet also made it easier to communicate with one another, giving individuals more freedom to spread their ideologies and propaganda, gaining validation from supporting groups, which reinforces their loyalty to the party. These three mechanisms, selective exposure, viral content, and ideological posts, stimulate polarization through social media.

Algorithms

Algorithms are central in this issue, as they analyze users' behavior and give them content they most likely might relate to. It is addictive; it prioritizes posts that make sure you will stay on the platform, but at the same time, it can stimulate polarization when it comes to political posts or news. It becomes more challenging to question whether their belief is right and consider any other viewpoints as valid. On the other hand, seeing contrasting content after repeatedly being exposed to information confirming their statements and ideology can bring more mistrust and division between the two opposing parties and, thus, within the society. This becomes a loop since controversial and polarized posts often tend to generate more interactions. As algorithms take these signals as indicating that such content is relevant for the entertainment of the user, it will make sure the user sees more, which stimulates polarization even further.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Another key problem in avoiding polarization is the huge uprise of AI in the past few years. As AI grows and tends to be more realistic than ever, it still brings some dangers. It can spread polarized content through bots and deepfakes. In politics, it can provide more mistrust not only between the individuals but also institutions, media, and authorized parties since most of the politicians own accounts on various platforms such as X and Instagram, making them vulnerable to fake content as well. This can lead to more issues if, for example, deep-faked government documents get widespread over the internet and political parties decide to make decisions based on misinformation. AI-generated content can now be used as propaganda, but for now, its power is still limited. However, this doesn't mean AI has no influence at all; in fact, AI-generated deep fakes seem to be more accurate, as we see, for instance, during the war, where a video of President Zelensky urging his troops to surrender was circulating over the internet. Although it was debunked quickly, it still shows the potential of the AI. Another example is the U.S. elections in 2016, where Russian-linked bots spread misinformation, targeting users with opposing ideologies, just like the bots during the COVID-19 epidemic spread lots of conspiracy theories about vaccines to polarize debates about health.

Misinformation and propaganda

Misinformation and propaganda are common factors stimulating polarization on the internet. A great example is the Ukrainian War, where outdated or unreal footages were presented as actual events. In 2022, a video with 27 million views circulated on TikTok showing military men parachuting, and it was believed to be footage of Russian troops attacking Ukraine; it was, in fact, an old video from 2015, unrelated to the Ukraine-Russia war. It isn't the only example, in the same year, a video shared by the verified account of the Ministry of Defence claimed to destroy a Russian Su-35, while later on, it was identified as a video from a game called Digital Combat Simulator World. This shows how easy it is to believe, as even authorized and verified accounts aren't always to be fully trusted, and how important it is to stay critical.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
1 st of January 1983	Invention of internet.
1989	First World Wide Web giving access to internet to general public.

1997	The first social media platform, Six Degrees, launches, allowing users to create profiles.
2004	Facebook was founded.
2005	YouTube launches, it is now possible to share and create videos.
2006	Twitter (now X) is launched, introducing communication through social media.
2014	Facebook acquired AI company DeepMind, adding AI into social media platforms.
2016	U.S. Presidential Election, misinformation spread by (Russian linked) bots.
2017	Facebook reveals Russian bots and troll farms targeted U.S. citizens during the election.
2020	COVID-19 pandemic, polarization over health vaccines.
2021	Black Lives Matter movement highlighted by the murder of George Floyd.
2022	Deepfake of Ukraine's President Zelensky circulates during the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
2023-2024	Advance of ChatGPT.

Major Parties Involved

United States

The U.S. struggles with increasing polarization, especially during important events such as elections (especially in 2016 and 2020). It is also home to various social media companies such as X, owned by Elon Musk, and Instagram. Social media was also a critical tool for organizing the Capitol Riot on the 6th of January 2021. Although the U.S. has tried to reduce polarization through various Congressional Hearings where the executives from Facebook, X, and Google have testified about their role in spreading misinformation and polarization, there are yet no legal regulations. In the U.S., Section 230 of the Communications Act applies and holds that users and services cannot be sued for forwarding emails, hosting online reviews, or sharing photos or videos that others find

objectionable, meaning no juristic actions can be taken in this case against users spreading misinformation. It is also up to the State to make its own legalizations, like California's Privacy Laws.

Russia

Russia has often been accused of using social media to spread disinformation by employing 'troll farms' or automated bots to engage in controversial discussions to further divide opinions and push them into extremist ideologies. For example, Russia has been accused of exacerbating racial tensions in the U.S. by using social media to promote content that divides people along racial lines during, for example, Black Lives Matter movements or elections. Russia also has a long history of supporting extremist political groups and movements across various countries, which is also a part of its geopolitical strategy to weaken countries from the inside and, like in the case of Hungary or Georgia, become a supporter of the Russian government.

Hungary

Hungary has become a central point for discussion about polarization and media manipulation. Since the Fidesz party and Prime Minister Viktor Orban came to power in 2010, Hungary's democracy has been under pressure as its governance was characterized by the centralization of power, controlling the media, and thus weakening independent institutions. This led to mistrust between political parties where supporters of Fidesz, who see Orban as an important defender of national sovereignty, and opponents accusing him of regime undermining Hungarian democracy. The Hungarian government was also accused of spreading propaganda on social media from its nationalist, anti-EU, and anti-immigrant perspective. By controlling and influencing traditional media, he managed to further divide public opinion. In 2015, during the European migrant crisis, Hungary's government spread through media warning posts about the dangers of immigration with its anti-immigration campaign, misleading and polarizing individuals over the country. A similar thing happened with the anti-LGBTQ+ campaign, where the government passed controversial laws restricting discussions with the narrative of 'protecting children,' also mass spread by the government accounts on social media. Polarization had a huge impact on Hungarian society, with people aligning with either 'pro' or 'anti' with a 'zero-sum' view.

Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global human rights organization that addresses political polarization and extremism and protects freedom and individual's right to express their opinions. By highlighting the role of social media in amplifying extremist views, the organization encourages

critical thinking and responsibility among both governments and citizens. It also pushes the importance of accountability of social media companies to eliminate the spread of polarized political content, especially when it violates human rights. It protects citizens' rights to have free speech and privacy but also supports political prisoners and oppressed groups when extreme political polarization leads to the prosecution of certain political groups. It supports the groups facing political oppression.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

RSF is an NGO that defends and protects press freedom around the world by advocating the protection of journalists and media that operate in increasingly hostile and dangerous environments, such as regions where war occurs and where social media platforms are often victims of polarizing content. It also works to counter the spread of misinformation by pushing for responsible journalism and greater transparency in how information is spread online. RSF works for better protection of journalists from harassing polarized groups by monitoring threats and reports on the situation of journalists who are targeted for their work. RSF provides research that includes examining the role of social media platforms in spreading extreme content that stimulates political divisions and conflicts. They also work with international organizations like the United Nations to create global frameworks that address the challenges posed by social media to democracy and press freedom.

Possible Solutions

In order to solve the polarization issue, reforms of institutions, such as decentralizing power or changing rules, might be needed. Other efforts can be made through legal or juridical action demanding more accountability for hate crimes and violence, factors that both continuously occur and stimulate polarization. Political changes could also be successful in reducing the partisan divide between the parties, like in Ecuador and Turkey, where the political leaders shift 'back' to the center of politics and their party, trying to find common ground instead of falling into strict ideological ideas.

When it comes to social media, platforms need to take greater responsibility for the content posted, especially when it comes to politically sensitive content. Such platforms need more transparency on the algorithms as well and should be able to control which content gets prioritized and, if needed, ban it to prevent further division when it falls into extremism. It should count not only for the individuals but also for politicians when enforcing stricter policies on the use of

misinformation, AI, and propaganda. Community Guidelines should also be enforced to prevent hate speeches and toxic behavior supported by some political groups.

Since AI also plays a role in polarization, it is important to also take it into account while finding solutions; it is necessary to develop stricter oversight of AI to prevent the spread of deep fakes and to develop AI tools to identify misinformation. Also, all AI-generated content should be labeled as AI to prevent misinformation and help users recognize AI content better.

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