



SOCIAL MEDIA MANIPULATION TECHNIQUES THAT EXACERBATE U.S. POLITICAL POLARITY

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Social Media Manipulation Techniques That Can Exacerbate U.S. Political Polarity

Social media has become ubiquitous. A glaring issue, however, is that even though social media has become such a massive part of our lives, it needs to be better regulated. This lack of regulation is problematic since social media is vulnerable to many methods of cyber manipulation. Because of social media's deep integration into society and the global community, hundreds of millions of people are vulnerable to these methods of cyber manipulation. In particular, this issue touches on the worsening political polarity in the U.S. Echo chambers and filter bubbles will be examined later. However, these synonymous terms are algorithmic phenomena where users are stuck in a flow of content that is ideologically homogeneous. This is problematic due to an oversaturation of a single viewpoint a user "trapped" in an echo chamber would experience.

Echo chamber algorithms and their paper-thin regulation has allowed foreign powers to spread misinformation and radicalize people. They exacerbate political polarity by relentlessly

over-saturating the media with a certain ideological viewpoint. This isolates a user's understanding and polarizes them from the broader group of social media users. This is particularly relevant in the political sphere of social media users. As a result, there has been an explosion of extreme and even irrational ideas recently. For clarification, Echo chambers are a phenomenon in social media. However, because of their aforementioned properties that exacerbate political polarity, they present a national security risk since malicious individuals or organizations could utilize echo chambers to proliferate and expose more people to dangerous media like misinformation and radical political ideology.

Using such techniques as bots, hacking, spreading false information, echo chambers, and filter bubbles threaten U.S. political cohesion. These techniques allow foreign powers to manipulate public opinion in the U.S. and exacerbate its political polarity and division. This undeniable and growing threat needs more attention and responsive action by the U.S. government and social media companies.

Social Media Exacerbates U.S. Political Polarity

Echo chambers, algorithms, and filter bubbles are the three main techniques that can be used to manipulate public opinion through social media. An *echo chamber* is an algorithm in social media that over-exposes a person or group to a specific set of beliefs that reinforces their already-held ideas (Jiang et al., 2021). In the echo chamber, users are not exposed to alternative or competing viewpoints and are ideologically isolated from other social media users. This results in a decreased perspective and greater radicalization and tribalism. A *filter bubble* is much of the same phenomenon; it is personalized to an individual, using algorithms that have carefully analyzed the user's internet usage data to find individuals receptive to their ideology.

According to Lee de-Wit (2019), social media sites such as Twitter and Reddit actively use filter bubbles to create a flow of media that traps and surrounds a user with targeting information exposing the user only to a stream of thematically specific content. Thus, different users and groups are exposed to single and distinct narratives, often mutually exclusive and thus divided from everyone else. In particular, echo chambers and filter bubbles contribute heavily to polarization and tribalism on Twitter. The “retweet” function allows for facilitated community development for a user, and this can develop echo chambers. As posited by Conover, “*Facilitated community development* is a process of developing tribalism in the landscape of social media, and the retweet function works to facilitate this tribalism.” (2021, p. 1). Social media platforms have functions and tools that promote polarization and vulnerability to user information and echo chamber manipulation.

Clear examples of the effects of echo chambers on political polarity in the U.S. are the rise of radical political groups and the increasing abrasive and violent division between left and right political groups. Social media’s echo chamber mechanics has mostly facilitated the development of intense political polarization. The rise of the MAGA/Trump support movement is an ideal example. On the other hand, left social-political movements like the Black Lives Matter movements were born through social media and the internet. However, the movement progressively became more politically radical and abrasive due to the nature of echo chambers.

The algorithms that operate social media’s “political polarizing machine”

A Brookings Institute study looked closely at social media’s “political polarizing machine.” It concluded that the structure of social media platform algorithms are designed to perpetuate polarization as it tends to favor content that attracts attention, which is usually politically controversial or harmful, to boost user engagement and activity on the social media

platform (Barrett & Sims, 2022). This perpetuation of popular content elicits “sectarian fear or indignation” in like-minded individuals (Barrett & Sims, 2022). As mentioned, social media platforms create echo chambers because social media algorithms are engineered to bring attention to posts with many clicks. Thus, should controversial and radical posts/media get many clicks and much attention, they will be elevated on the social media platform through the algorithm and shown to more users to boost engagement. This positive feedback cycle is the backbone of an echo chamber algorithm; the media gets increasingly extreme as the posts get more and more attention.

In this algorithm, no system distinguishes negative and positive popular content. Thus, hurtful and misleading information can circulate freely on social media if it is engaged with enough, leading to social media echo chambers. A recent field experiment analyzed Facebook’s ad targeting algorithm regarding political views. The study concluded that “exposure to pro-attitudinal news increases affective polarization compared to counter-attitudinal news. The study concluded that social media could increase polarization and raises concern since affective polarization may decrease trust in government and the accountability of elected officials” (Levy, 2021, p. 2).

In exposing people to attitudinal news, social media can create significant polarization. Polarization is critical as it can cause disunity in a country and distrust in government officials and the democratic system. Many claim this process is happening, but little is done to prevent it. This is evident by the “Woke mind Virus,” which is a relatively new term coined by Elon Musk to categorize the radical liberal coalition and the Trump supporter coalition that conducted a riot at the U.S. capitol on January 6th, 2021. Social media and echo chamber algorithms have intensified both groups/movements. In light of the lack of regulation in social media information

exchange and echo chambers, there is the daunting realization that a foreign power could take advantage of this to exacerbate the political polarity of the U.S.

The vulnerability of social media manipulation by foreign entities

Organized powers can harness and manipulate echo chambers and filter bubbles in many ways. One crucial method is programming bots to spread misinformation or propaganda into a user's echo chamber or social media feed. They can program these bots to post a certain type of information continuously. Since an echo chamber exposes social media users to a single type of content, this propaganda and misinformation will continuously pop up for users. This can significantly alter the user's opinion and ideology. For example, Howard (2018) contends that in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a Russian online group manipulated social media and the U.S. public, possibly undermining democracy by spreading propaganda distributed with bots to specific political communities on social media. This effort from an organized group shows a clear threat to political information through social media. It demonstrates the security weakness of social media and the potentially disastrous effects when manipulated by the wrong people or an aggressive foreign power. Recent research studying fake news, conspiracy theories, and the social media bots that proliferate them showed statistical evidence that they facilitate the manipulation of public opinion in the U.S. Furthermore, efforts to increase political polarity and misinformation happen daily through the aforementioned means (Dubois, 2020). The study reinforces the potential and avenues for social manipulation through the internet and digital space. Furthermore, knowing the threats on social media gives us a better idea of what we can do to protect against manipulation and misinformation.

Initiatives to combat social media manipulation

Combative action has been made to prevent social media manipulation techniques foreign powers can use to exacerbate U.S. political polarity. For example, countries such as France, Russia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Germany have pushed for legislation to outlaw the distortion of information on social media. Informational technology giants like Google and Facebook are attempting to prevent the negative implications of social media misinformation and Echo Chambers by partnering with “fact-checking networks” and creating “war rooms” (Dubois, 2020). This shows that there are some proactive efforts to police this issue by large companies like Google and Facebook. However, these efforts seem ineffective, as Barrett & Sims (2022), Conover (2021), Levy (2021), and others suggest. They contend that cybersecurity threats, echo chambers, and social media misinformation persist despite the counteractive measures discussed by Dubois (2020).

Although there is an apparent effort to solve the threat posed by social media echo chambers, more is needed, as an abundance of sources suggests. For one, legislative action against social media misinformation by the aforementioned countries is legally flimsy and hard to impose. Moreover, the “fact-checking networks” and “war rooms” do not reach millions and billions of posts on Facebook and other social media platforms. Misinformation and echo chambers are still significant problems, and major social media companies need more attention and responsibility for this.

Conclusion

A distressing threat to national security and individual thought persists due to echo chambers and filter bubbles that continuously occur on social media. The over-saturation of uniform content, especially if it is political, ideologically isolates the user. This is the first step to political polarity for that person. It progresses as the process continues. As this phenomenon

continues uninhibited, social media, a ubiquitous public platform that has very little regulation, will develop into an avenue for severe societal and political damage. This is a concern as it allows foreign powers to conduct espionage, spread misinformation and propaganda, and politically polarize the U.S. Although efforts have been made to combat and circumvent the issue, they have yet to be nearly effective enough, if effective at all. The issues of echo chambers and cyberspace manipulation techniques by foreign powers to exacerbate U.S. political polarity in social media are still an issue and are underwhelmingly dealt with. We need more attention and action regarding this issue.

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