information systems journal

Special Issue Call for Papers

Causes, Symptoms and Consequences of Social Media Induced Polarization (SMIP)

Short Title (SI: Polarization and Social Media)

Special Issue Guest Senior Editors

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1. Introduction and Motivation

While social media provides users with unparalleled access to information from around the globe, the principles of diversity, discourse and debate are being challenged by the rise of partisan news and polarized discussion on digital platforms. This phenomenon allows individuals to insulate themselves in "echo chambers" where exposure to content consistent with their opinions reinforces existing beliefs, attitudes, and the resulting behavior (Boutyline & Willer, 2017; Flaxman et al., 2016). The dangerous implications and outcomes of such polarization can be seen in various controversies including those surrounding the recent COVID-19 outbreak. It is alarming to observe the polarization around the causes of the spread of the virus and governments' response to it, including the treatment of migrant workers and homeless people during the lockdowns. The polarization is especially concerning in this case because it was expected that everyone would fight unitedly against an invisible enemy (coronavirus)[1]. Therefore, irrespective of how grave an event or issue is, the formation of echo chambers fuels ideological homophily with amplified and reinforced beliefs that enhance segregation and increasingly create political, administrative and social gridlock in many contexts and countries (Hutchens et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2019). The thriving of propaganda, disinformation, and misguided beliefs through echo chambers aggravates violence, poverty and poor health conditions (Nikolov et al., 2019; Wang et al. 2018). For instance, during the recent COVID-19 outbreak, echo chambers led to the reinforcement of misinformation and misguided beliefs which in turn led to racist and xenophobic outbursts, assaults and discriminatory practices against particular racial groups in many parts of the world[2].

[1] https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200406-why-smart-people-believe-coronavirus-myths
[2] https://abcnews.go.com/US/backlash-asians-hinder-efforts-coronavirus-expert/story?id=69556008

Consider the causes and consequences of polarization arising due to the following events:

- With the current Republican president in the USA, Democrats and Democratic leaners are more worried about the outbreak of COVID19 and 10-20% are more likely to adhere to preventive measures such as, social distancing and washing hands frequently as compared to Republicans. Moreover, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe fictitious statements about the pandemic such as "The Chinese government deliberately spread the coronavirus as a bioweapon". On the other hand, with a Democratic president, in 2014, Republicans were more concerned about the outbreak of Ebola than were the Democrats.[3]
- The polarization induced by fake news of a baby's bloodied corpse led to violence and killing of 10 people in Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria.[4]
- A coordinated campaign initiated by secondary school students against fare evasion on the metro in Santiago, Chile, led to civil protests, violence, deaths, and instability throughout the country, damaging rich, cultural heritage sites and museums.[5]
- India's efforts to suppress the film titled "India's daughter", which was based on the brutal rape and murder of a young woman, backfired and triggered a widespread proliferation of pirated and unauthorized copies of the film on social media.[6]
- The partisan media polarization in the USA on climate change decreased support for green deals among conservative Republicans from 57% to 32% between December 2018 and April 2019.[7]

These examples indicate that the social media induced polarization (SMIP) of opinions about information/misinformation related to socio-cultural activities, products or services can lead to mass destruction of property and widespread human suffering (O'Hara & Stevens, 2015). The widespread consumption of information on social media platforms that were designed for people to express themselves freely, fairly, safely and to make informed decisions, may induce polarization of attitudes with consequent impacts on behavior. As an example, the political polarization visible in the Facebook news feed of one of the guest editors of this special issue is depicted in Figure 1.

In Figure 1a, the dots on the left side of the figure represent friends who are liberal leaning (shown with blue dots). The dots on the right side of the figure represent friends who are conservative leaning (shown with red dots). The size of the dots indicates how often certain friends show up in a user's news feed. The haziness of a dot, i.e. whether a dot is sharp or blurred, indicates the degree of confidence in classifying a dot (friend) as liberal or conservative. A sharp color indicates higher confidence. Figure 1a shows that most of the friends, and especially those who regularly appear in the news feed, are liberal. Figure 1b shows the distribution of the friends in a pie chart where again, most of the friends are liberal leaning. Similarly, Figure 1c shows that most of the news feed is sourced from liberal leaning sources. Taken together, Figure 1 indicates the unbalanced news feed and the political inclinations of one's circle of friends. This unbalanced situation is increasingly common in the newsfeed of the consumers of Facebook and other social media platforms.

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[3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/03/23/coronavirus-polarization-political-exaggeration
[4] https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-12-24/la-fg-nigeria-fake-news-bill
[5] https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/bolivia-reflects-the-deep-polarization-crisis-in-latin-america
[6] https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/sons-and-daughters
[7] https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/how-political-polarization-increased-on-the-green-new-deal

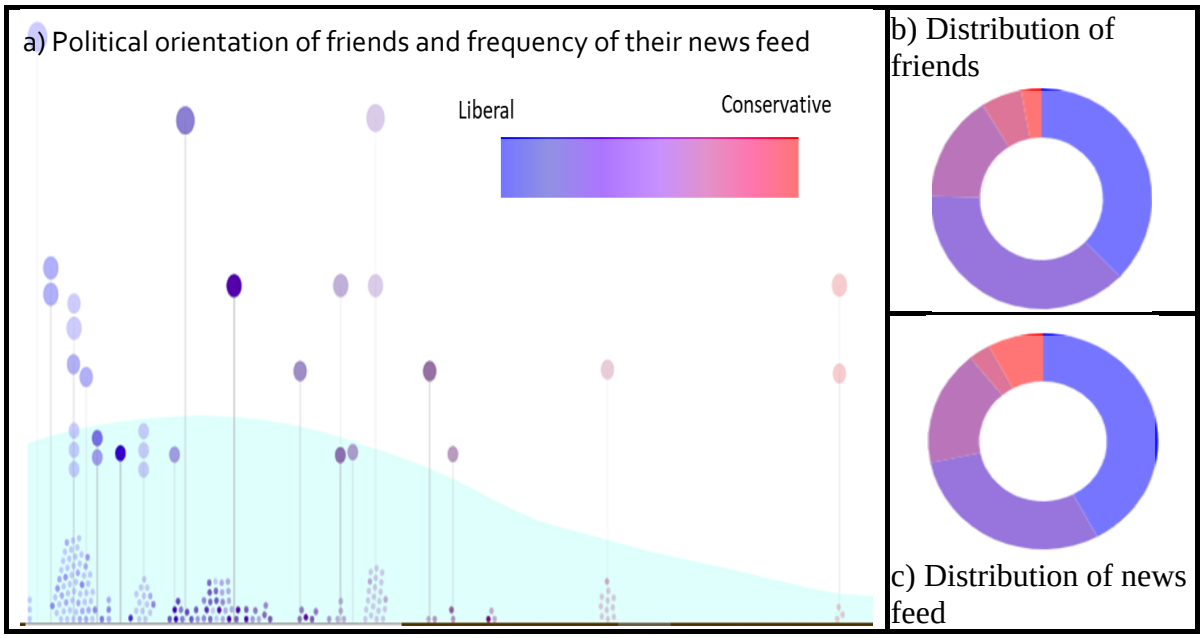

Figure 1: Political polarization in Facebook news feed based on the content consumed by the user's friends[8]

As we continue to immerse ourselves in social media platforms and polarization trends continue around the world, the importance of understanding the formation and evolution of echo chambers, specifically in the socio-cultural realm, rises. Though a significant amount of research has been undertaken on the positive aspects of the formation of communities in real-world networks (Kumar et al., 2017), existing research on negative aspects such as polarization is inadequate. Specifically, the issue of socio-cultural polarization around such topics as healthcare, vaccination, climate change, education, warfare, and cultural issues is an emerging avenue of research due to its enormous impact on the shaping of our society (Fisher et al., 2013). Thus, it is important to answer such questions as: Why are we becoming polarized? Is social media a prominent driver of polarization? Around what kind of products or services do polarizing debates occur and how does social media shape debates? How does the propagation of misinformation/fake news coupled with the formation of echo chambers lead to polarization and affect our society? What are the causes of SMIP? What kind of social issues lead to SMIP in today's digitally interconnected world and what measures can be taken from a policy perspective to minimize the negative consequences of SMIP?

The importance of understanding polarization has long been acknowledged in reference disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and communication research. Table 1 summarizes various theories used in understanding the causes and consequences of polarization in these fields. We believe socio-cultural polarization poses a dangerous problem for society, one that is likely to intensify with the increasing use of *social media*. Thus, understanding the dynamics, causes, symptoms, and consequences of socio-cultural polarization is critical and would be valuable for developing interventions to reduce unhealthy societal and cultural polarization. We need to investigate the interplay between various kinds of psychological factors such as categorization, partisan identification strength, and attitude extremity as well as factors such as user-level, group-level and system-level biases, all of which lead to a user becoming trapped in a vicious cycle of polarization (Westfall et al. 2015).

[8] Graph obtained using an open source application: politecho.org

Table 1: Various Theories and Processes Used to Explain Polarization		
Theories	**Citations**	**Description**
Sociological Theories		
Game Theory	Woon (2018)	Behavioral game theory has been used to understand mechanisms that link voter behavior to strategic expectations and, in turn, candidate positioning that leads to polarization among candidates
Muted Group Theory	Korn (2016)	It refers to the inability of marginalized groups to express themselves due to inequity in language. This may result in loss and distortion of information leading to polarization
Social Identity Theory	Iyengar et al. (2012); Wojcieszak & Garrett (2018)	Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group memberships. Strong social attachments to one's group drives anti-deliberative ideological and partisan attitudes
Social Distance	Akerlof (1997)	It refers to the level of acceptance or trust that an individual or group feels towards another individual or group in a social network and may lead to ideological behaviour resulting into polarization.
Protracted Social Conflict	Azar & Moon (1986)	It refers to hostile interactions between communal groups that are based in deep-seated ethnic, racial, cultural and religious hatreds, and that persist over long periods resulting into polarized behaviour
Psychological Theories		
Cognitive Dissonance Theory	Mullainathan & Washington (2009)	It refers to the phenomenon by which people experience positive feelings when presented with opinion reinforcing information. It extends to consumption of opinion-reinforcing information on social media thus leading to polarization
Confirmation Bias	Westerwick et al. (2017)	Confirmation bias is defined as the tendency to interpret, search for, recall, and favor information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses resulting into polarized views about an issue or event.
Motivated Skepticism	Han & Federico (2018); McCright (2016)	It refers to the tendency of applying more skepticism to the information that an individual doesn't like while accepting the information that aligns with his/her pre-existing beliefs easily leading to attitude polarization.
Motivated Reasoning	Taber & Lodge (2006)	It refers to phenomena wherein individuals indulge in biased reasoning to maintain consistency among attitude, behaviour and self-image so as to arrive at a preferred conclusion.
Anti-reflexivity theory	McCright (2016)	It refers to the mobilization of some sectors of society to challenge the shift towards societal self-confrontation. It leads to denial of climate change and countermovement thus defending industrial capitalist system and supporting polarization
Communication Theories		
Agenda Setting Theory	Hyun & Moon (2016)	The agenda-setting theory describes the influential role of the media in informing the public what issues to think about thus polarizing the audience about importance of issues
Cultivation Theory	Shanahan et al. (1999)	It refers to the phenomena wherein society's reality tends to align with reality portrayed on media and television. For instance, repeated exposure to violence on television may reinforces belief that the world is a unsafe place and lead to polarized society.

Elaboration Likelihood Model	Arceneaux et al. (2013); Henningsen et al. (2003)	ELM attempts to explain how attitudes are shaped, formed, and reinforced by persuasive arguments thus reaffirms initial attitude
Flaming	Cho & Kwon (2015)	Flaming refers to hostile online interaction on internet forums, chat rooms, social networks due to which ideological beliefs between people of differing cultures are polarized
Spiral of Silence	Clemente & Roulet (2015); Kushin et al. (2019)	It states that individuals are more likely to self-censor their views when they believe that there is a disagreeable opinions climate. Thus by effectively limiting the range of publicly expressed opinions democratic systems are threatened and lead to political polarization
Selection Processes		
Homophily	Boutyline & Willer (2017)	Homophily refers to tendency of individuals to associate with others who are similar to themself. Homophily leads to users connecting with others who have similar views as their own, thus forming echo chambers on social networks.
Selective Exposure	Arceneaux et al. (2013); Wojcieszak & Garrett (2018)	Selective exposure leads to biased consumption, perception and retention of media content, that leads to reinforcement of polarized attitudes
Groupthink	Baron (2005)	Groupthink refers to a psychological phenomenon that occurs within a group of people in which the desire for conformity or harmony in the group results in a polarized outcome.
Herd Behavior	Hamilton (1964)	Herd behavior describes how individuals in a group can act together without any planned direction. The term pertains to the polarized behavior of humans during activities such as episodes of mob violence, religious gatherings, sporting events, and street demonstrations
False Consensus Effect	Leviston et al. (2013); Ross et al. (1977)	It is an interpersonal bias due to which and individual tends to overestimate how much other people agree with him/her. This leads people to believe that the majority of other people share same opinions thus leading to extreme views and polarization
Polarization		
Echo Chambers	Boutyline & Willer (2017); Flaxman et al. (2016);	Echo chambers refer to situations where people “hear their own voice”. In the context of social media it refers to situations where users consume content that expresses the same point of view that users hold themselves.
Cyberbalkanization	Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson (2005)	Cyberbalkanization describes the division of the global internet into a number of smaller, nationally-administered internets aligned along commercial, religious or geopolitical boundaries
Filter Bubbles	Flaxman et al. (2016); Pariser (2011)	It refers to phenomena where users’ information is algorithmically filtered according to their preferences on online platforms, and hence reinforces their point of view.
Ghettoization	Wright & Jacobs (1994)	It refers to a social process of confinement and isolation of members of a particular community to a restricted area. In the context of social media, it means that users’ views are much less challenged and improved than they are hardened and made more extreme

The following framework (Figure 2) highlights various biases that are drawn from social, psychological and communication theories and can be used to understand polarization in society.

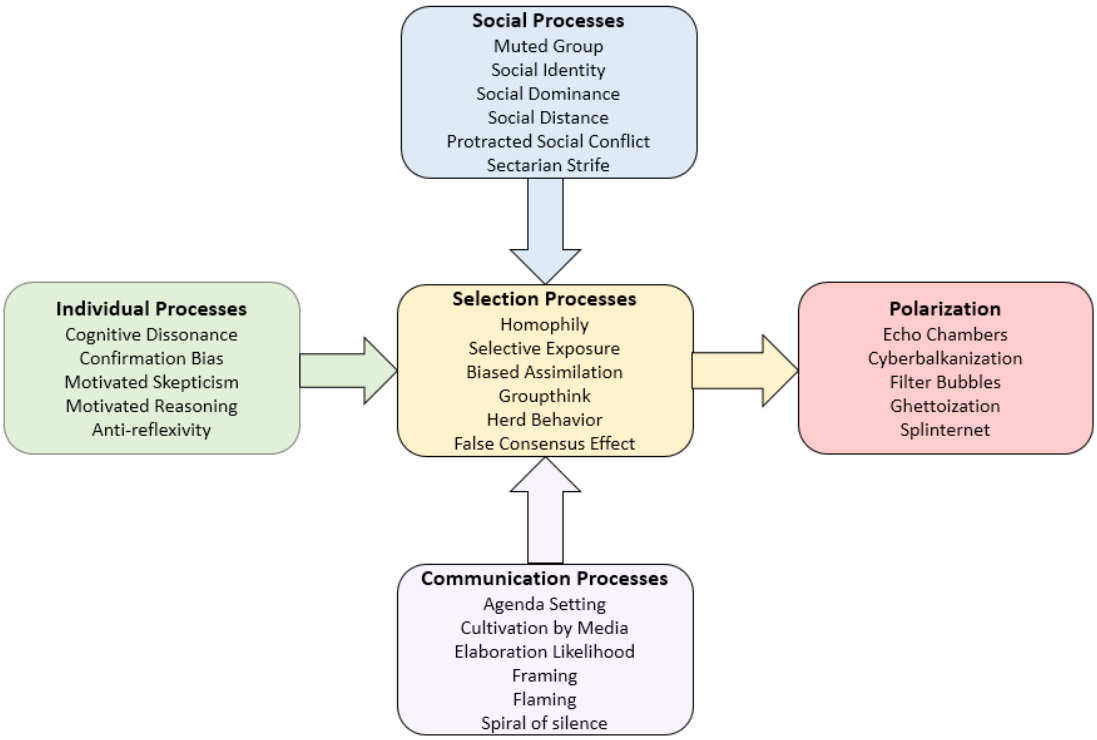

Figure 2: A framework depicting various processes that lead to polarization

2. Objectives of the Special Issue

This special issue seeks to address the conceptualization and issues surrounding SMIP. The overarching objective of this special issue is to present exemplary research that focusses on the development of new theories and artifacts for the measurement of polarization, as well as helping us achieve a better understanding of its drivers and consequences. Several questions are worthy of research in the domain of SMIP. Investigation of the digital proliferation of debates and controversies around cultural activities, products, and services, their reinforcement through echo chambers and evaluation of its impact on society is required. Additionally, a better understanding of the technological factors that drive polarization in the socio-cultural domain and consequently, the dynamics and evolution of the complex structures that give rise to echo chambers is also required. The negative consequences of polarization, such as increased social gridlock and partisanship, need enhanced scrutiny. This will also require methodological advances in modelling and managing polarization. Finally, further assessment of the importance of policy initiatives to help public and private decision-makers to handle socio-cultural discourse/controversies with minimal damage is required.

With a wide range of research investigations that are needed in the area of polarization, this special issue aims to open up a forum for a discussion of the causes, symptoms, and consequences of SMIP. This research will spark a broader conversation on any socio-cultural context that may hold significance in developing and developed nations in terms of comparison and learning from challenges of polarization driven primarily through social media. Such research could focus on any aspect within the socio-cultural domain including but not limited

to people, festivals, organizations, industries or products such as books, films, media, performing arts, architecture, etc.

We welcome submissions that extend our knowledge of the global phenomenon of SMIP through either novel conceptual frameworks or rigorous empirical research. We are open to qualitative and quantitative papers. We expect contributions to offer new empirical insights, develop new concepts and theories, and offer directions for practice and policy. We will not consider papers with atheoretical research designs or mathematical modelling techniques devoid of an empirical element.

3. Key Questions and Themes

Based on the systematic literature reviews on the issue of polarization, we identified a set of research questions for this special issue. These questions include, but are not limited to, the following:

Theory-driven Research Questions

- What are the theoretical underpinnings of various SMIP processes?
- What are the various selection, filtering, and sorting processes through which echo chambers emerge?
- Are there cross-country differences in SMIP? What are the theoretical explanations for those differences?
- What are the characteristics, structure, and architecture of platforms on which socio-cultural polarization takes place?
- What theoretical insights can be drawn from the temporal dynamics of the formation of echo chambers?

Phenomenon-driven Research Questions

- To what extent do social media platform users experience polarization?
- Why is polarization on climate change increasing in spite of better access to information?
- How did a pandemic become a source of polarizing debate on social media?
- How can organizations and governments help individuals engage more consciously or critically with controversial or fake content?
- What are the temporal dynamics of the formation of echo chambers around climate change debate?
- What are the platform policy innovations that may minimize SMIP?

4. Review and Publishing Process

Considering the emerging importance of understanding SMIP, especially in the context of social media use, as well as the acknowledged reputation of the Information Systems Journal in publishing papers that investigate topics of societal interest, we expect authors to submit innovative research designs that have the potential to make cutting-edge contributions to knowledge. Authors should explain, in the cover letter, how they meet the special issue objectives and how their findings are generalizable or transferable to a broad range of contexts. All submitted papers will undergo a rigorous peer-review process that will consider relevance to the special issue, scientific rigor, significance, originality, style, and clarity. Reviews will be conducted on a rolling basis. *Authors can submit their papers at any time on or before January 31, 2021*. Submitted papers will be immediately screened by the SI Editorial Board to ensure that they fit the objectives of the SI and ISJ, and can be reasonably improved during the

indicated time frame. For formatting criteria, authors should refer to the ISJ website at https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/13652575/homepage/ForAuthors.html.
Manuscripts that are screened in will go through the SI review process. It is expected that a manuscript will normally go through a maximum of three rounds of revision before a final decision is reached.

5. Timeline:

Reviews will be conducted on a rolling basis. **Submission Deadline: January 31, 2021.** ***No deadline extensions will be made.***

6. Associate Editors

Ahmed Imran, UNSW (Canberra)
Andreas Eckhardt, German Graduate School of Management and Law
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Biographies of Guest Editors

Israr Qureshi is a Professor at Research School of Management, Australian National University. He is engaged in projects that investigate various aspects of social value creation through sustainable development, social intermediation, social entrepreneurship, and ICT. He is also engaged in various initiatives to address climate change. He has published in Academy of Management Learning and Education, Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Organization Behavior, MIS Quarterly, Organization Studies, Research in the Sociology of Organizations among others. Israr has chaired panels and delivered keynote speeches on emerging business models to address social and environmental issues.

Babita Bhatt is a Lecturer at Research School of Management, Australian National University. She earned her PhD from Norman Paterson School of International Affairs. Her research interest lies at the intersection of community, civil society and organizations. She applies social capital theory and capability approach to understand how social impact is achieved by organizations engaged in poor communities. Her work has been published in Organization Studies and Journal of Business Ethics, and has received funding from IDRC, Canada and

RGC, Hong Kong. Her work on social cohesion and social entrepreneurship has been recognized with a grand challenge grant of about A$3 million.

Samrat Gupta is an Assistant Professor at Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad. He received his doctoral degree from Indian Institute of Management Lucknow. His broad research interests are in the area of Information Systems and Management with a focus on complex networks, cultural products, soft computing and online platforms. His work has been published in Information Sciences, Decision Support Systems, Data & Knowledge Engineering and Journal of Prediction Markets. One of his projects on investigating polarization in social media has received funding from MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource Development, India) under a competitive granting scheme named as SPARC. His research has received several awards from reputed organizations around the world such as IDRBT, Hyderabad, IIM Bangalore and Complex Engineering Systems Institute, University of Chile.

Amit Anand Tiwari is an Assistant Professor at IIM Rohtak. He received his doctoral degree from Indian Institute of Management Lucknow. His research focuses on contemporary issues in creative industries and cultural products. His research interests span over various areas like service dominant logic, products coolness, and complex networks brand implications. His work has been published in Marketing Intelligence & Planning and Measuring Business Excellence. His projects on cultural products and echo chambers have received funding from MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource Development, India) under prestigious granting initiatives such as SPARC. His research has received award from IIM Ahmedabad.