

# Facebooks segregation of communities is fuelling the destruction of democracy.

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## Abstract:

The public spheres operation is dependent on the open access of locations that enable people to congregate together and participate in political deliberations. Virtual communities implemented through social media have reshaped the public spheres third spaces of discussion. But Facebook's compartmentalisation of communities is detrimental to the operation of the public sphere. Facebooks generation of echo chamber induced groups enables a polarised feedback mechanism which increases social fragmentation of divergent ideologies and the erosion of rational discourse. Using a variety of studies and peer reviewed journals I will be explaining the process behind how categorical identities lead to the segregation of specific ideological communities which destroys the ability for public rational debate, impeding on the proper functioning of the public sphere and democracy.

## Full text:

Social media has become an essential part in the contemporary operation of the public sphere. Its omnipresence in society has enabled people to congregate within a digitized third space to partake in discourse and help to formulate opinions on political proceedings. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, are commended for revolutionising democratic mediations by enabling the public sphere to operate without the constraints of time or location, helping the spread of social awareness and political advocacy, while enabling communities to grow and deliberate on a variety of subjects and ideologies.

Jürgen Habermas explains that the principal function of the public sphere is to allow for informed citizens to freely exercise political discourse regarding the relation of state and power. His ideas suggest that successful democracies are legitimised by the public spheres approval that political decisions are fair and for the benefit of society (Stohr, 2013). Habermas highlights that a healthy public sphere is reliant on the unpersuasive distribution of information which allows individuals to construct their subjective opinions and

participate in composed political debate with a diverse range of people from their surrounding community (Stohr, 2013). The public spheres operation is dependent on the open access to locations that enable people to congregate together and participate in political deliberation. These 'third spaces' have existed throughout time as cafes, public libraries, universities, and wherever public debate took place outside formal institutions (Delanty, 2018). With the rise of the internet, modern third spaces have emerged onto a digital landscape. Virtual communities implemented through online forums and social media platforms have reshaped the public spheres arenas of discussion, which exists alongside other kinds of physical community (Delanty, 2018).

Though social media has been commended for allowing modern deliberations to thrive, Facebook's platform facilitates the compartmentalization of groups which fuels the segregation of differing ideologies, construction of echo chambers, and the polarization of its users – which consequently erodes the proper functioning of the public sphere in its approach to conducting political discourse. In this paper I will be focusing on how Facebook groups facilitate the construction of ideological regulated communities, which rather than being an idealistic virtual third space, become incubators of reaffirming pre-existing personal beliefs which polarizes ideologies, restricts rational debates, and damages the system of democracy.

### **Communities of categorical identities**

Facebook's social media platform segregates political ideologies by constructing communities of similar categorical identities. Since its public inception in 2006, Facebook has been a world leader at alluring people to divulge enormous amounts of personal information in exchange for access to its platform (Marichal, 2012). This information is especially valuable to the framework's algorithms, advertisers, and political stakeholders which has shaped Facebook's business model into a necessity of maintaining its user's attention (Marichal, 2012). To ensure that its users are continually engrossed to its platform, the social media giant exploits this personal data to dispense ideological content that aligns with its user's choice of taste and culture - facilitating the construction of categorical identities (Pesce, 2017). The construction of a categorical identity allows users to

help build networks and join communities which align with pre-existing ideologies. This enables the social interaction from people who have similar preferences towards content (Delanty, 2018).

Calhoun (As cited by Delanty, 2018) explains that computer mediated communication aids the interaction of categorical identities. He sees the internet as a producer of virtual communities of similarities rather than networks of diverse people. Virtual communities are understood as a system of social relations, rather than location, where belonging requires the sense of sharing or understanding the same lifeworld terms (Delanty, 2018). These online communities enable the capacity for greater connection between people with similarities while inadvertently excluding people who do not necessarily share the groups ideology.

Facebook's group platform enables users with similar categorical identities to ensemble together to expand and deliberate on like-minded subjects. Groups can be either public or private, but in adherence to most community theology, consist of a collective held together by a similar interest or goal, giving new possibilities for expression, and enabling them to adapt to distance. However, these communities are more than likely to be based on the sharing of a single concern and made up of like-minded individuals rather than diverse network of various ideological positions (Delanty, 2018). The creation of communities with similarities segregates people into purpose-built enclaves where they can experience their already accepted ideological narrative from a group of like-minded individuals. This segregation from a diverse range of people keeps virtual communities compartmentalised rather than creating a public medium of deliberation which reduces the possibility of allowing alternative ideas to be voiced. Continually reinforcing the accepted ideological narrative isolates the community away from democratic processes as it only strengthens pre-existing social and political realities (Delanty, 2018).

### **Echo-chamber induced communities**

The compartmentalisation of Facebook groups immerses users into a feedback loop of concurring ideological narratives which fuels the creation of echo-chambers. Facebook's creation of categorical identities enables the possibility for users to cherry-pick content that

confirms or supports their established ideological narrative. Continual exposure to information that confirms already held beliefs can induce individuals into a confirmation bias (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016). Confirmation bias's are the result of identifying with information that verifies already held beliefs while rejecting information that is inconsistent to their ideological narrative (Zollo et al., 2018). Enabling users, who are subject to their own confirmation bias, to formulate groups with like-minded individuals increases the tendency for favoured belief structures to be continually presented (Orowa et al., 2020). Immersion of exclusively selected content that aligns to a favoured ideological narrative induces the group into an echo-chamber (True & Morales, 2019). An echo chamber, also known as a confirmation bubble, restricts the number of ideological perspectives that a group is exposed to (Del Vicario et al., 2017). This helps to solidify the acceptance of the group's ideological bias while normalizing the behaviour of rejecting dissenting information (Zollo et al., 2018). Eliminating reasonable and alternative sources from civic debate combined with conformity and repetition of favoured ideological narratives can manipulate the perceptions of its members and influence their assessment of public opinion (Avlon 2019).

A study conducted by Quattrociocchi, Scala, and Sunstein (2016) explores the effect that echo-chamber groups have on the treatment of two distinct narratives on Facebook, involving the spread of conspiracy theories and scientific information. The study found that intentionally false claims about the groups preferred narrative were accepted and shared, while debunking information that went against ideological preferences were mainly ignored. The echo-chamber induced communities were all statistically similar in terms of how communities were constructed by like-minded people and the way they interacted with content. For both conspiracy theories and scientific information, the more active a user is within an echo chamber, the more that user would interact with likeminded individuals. Group induced confirmation bias helped to account for users' decisions about spreading favourable content, thus creating informational cascades within communities of similarities. While exposure to alternative narratives showed to potentially increase the commitments of users who favoured conspiracy theories (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016).

Facebooks construction of compartmentalised groups enables a single serving ideological narrative to be continually presented within the virtual community (Zollo et al., 2018). Users

are more likely to dispense and interact with specific content that conforms to the groups accepted ideological narrative. People are able to easily align themselves with views and beliefs that are corresponding with their immediate interests, while also contributing similar content to the segregated community. This feedback mechanism greatly restricts the number of alternative perspectives a group is exposed to (Park et al., 2018) Habermas explained that citizens are required to be exposed to alternative views on public affairs to formulate opinion and participate in political discourse. Facebooks segregation of users away from an open public third space into compartmentalised groups with similar-minded ideology becomes a threat to a healthy democracy through the solidifying of existing belief structures and an increase in polarization (Orowa et al., 2020).

### **Polarization and erosion of deliberation**

The exposure of echo-chamber induced communities exacerbates the polarization of ideologies which degrades the ability for composed public deliberation. Segregated communities continual dispensing of self-interested ideologies reinforces the attitudes and beliefs embraced by its users. The reinforcement of pre-existing beliefs, combined with the normalising behaviours of rejecting disagreeing content, advances the fortification of a user's personal ideology (True & Morales, 2019). Polarization of ideology increases public divergence and prevents the ability for social cohesion to the point where opposing stances start to view each other as existential threats (García-Guadilla & Mallen, 2019). This polarization of ideology impedes on people's ability to consider other points of view, generates stubborn sentiments towards alternative ideas, and hinders the ability to learn and build on opinions by critiquing and encompassing new information (Orowa et al., 2020).

Sunstein (2009) suggests that deliberations which take place in echo-chamber induced communities usually end up at a more extreme ideological position, rather than coming to a rational compromise on a particular inclination. Because of Facebook's compartmentalisation of groups, alternative information and views can be discredited, similar ideological stances can be persistently reinforced, and group members can continue to deliberate without outside interference. This seclusion of community's results with users' ideological positions becoming further entrenched and polarized. Sunstein suggests that

segregated enclaves of like-minded individuals are often the breeding grounds for extreme ideologies. This is because group segregation produces ideological polarization, and polarization frequently results in the rise of political extremism (Sunstein, 2009).

Though polarized discourse is generated through Facebooks compartmentalised communities, a user's ideology continues to be voiced even when away from a segregated group. Discussions that move to a more public forum involving alternative ideological perspectives usually become inflamed due to a polarized user's inability to conduct rational debate. Cemented ideological stances are usually stubbornly expressed and defend which results in discussions becoming inflamed. Public discourse quickly becomes argumentative, dividing political cohesion, and amplifying the solidification of polarised views in a continual repetitive cycle. This results with an increase in intolerant political engagement, and an increasingly fragmented public sphere (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2015). Inflamed arguments participated by polarized Facebook users inhibits the ability for public discourse to find common ground for consensual decision-making. (Edda, et al., 2020) As discussed by True and Morales (2019), being mindful of alternative attitudes in public life hypothetically improves political tolerance. Communities that validate the behaviour of rejecting non-conforming information has the possibility to increase intolerance and the deterioration of public deliberations. The polarization of ideologies causes an exacerbation of contentious political arguments and increase society fragmentation which erodes the principal function of the public sphere.

## **Conclusion**

While Facebook has the potential to expose users to a diverse range of information, a more realistic possibility is that Facebook exacerbates users' tendency to form a polarized view of the world. This is not because Facebook constrains access to the view of others, but because the architecture of the platform is set up to encourage more dialogue within isolated communities and less listening to the wider public. As explained by Habermas, the principal function of the public sphere is to enable informed citizens to freely exercise rational deliberation regarding the relation of state and power. But Facebooks

compartmentalisation of communities erodes the public sphere's ability to congregate on an open forum, be unpersuasively informed, or even rationally deliberate.

Facebooks segregation of categorical identities obstructs the public sphere dependence on congregating a diverse range of ideological stances. Its compartmentalisation of communities inhibits the ability for a diverse range of ideological narratives to be comprehended, discussed, and learnt, which constrains rational critique of encompassing new information. This facilitates a like-minded ideological narrative that reaffirms the acceptance of an individual's pre-existing belief structure. A continuous stream of similar ideological stances reaffirming an individual's predisposed beliefs is counterproductive to Habermas's explanation to the necessity of unpersuasive distribution of information. The echo-chamber that is produced from such segregated communities solidifies a user's perception while normalising the practise of rejecting alternative information that diverts from the accepted ideological narrative. This increase of polarization amongst Facebook users fuels contentious political deliberations and inhibits the ability for cohesive debate. The extinguishing of rational public debate impedes on the publics ability to agree if certain political decisions are fair and for the benefit of society. Without the ability to do such, the public sphere is at risk of not being able to facilitate its job that it is intended to do - freely exercise political discourse regarding the relation of state and power. Without the ability to conduct deliberation, the public sphere becomes powerless, and endangers the system of democracy, which could see the rise of tyranny or even worse – indifference.

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