

TACKLING DISCOURSIVE POLARIZATION: WELCOME RADICAL IDEAS BUT NOT AGGRESSION!



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“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.” This is the first sentence of the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In the following paragraphs of its constitution, UNESCO identifies communication as key to creating mutual understanding between peoples and avoiding another global war (UNESCO, 2023). Yet communication and exchange may also militarize the minds of people. Political elites drive this process, instrumentalizing the emotions of people for political gain — and this will continue to be part of the political process. This essay will focus on two other actors currently shaping public opinion: professional journalism and social media networks. Both play their part in fueling discursive polarization. Most notably, they create an image of a society characterized by numerous conflicts between extreme groups that seem unwilling and unworthy of engaging in a constructive dialogue. This distorted depiction of society functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy — and this “false polarization” (Fernbach and Van Boven, 2022) polarizes debates and ultimately polarizes society.

As an example from current debates in German news media, I will focus on the issue of climate protests. News media coverage of recent protests by the group Letzte Generation (Last Generation) has paid considerable

attention to disruptive protests involving young people who throw soup at paintings or glue themselves to roads, but this coverage has largely ignored their cause (climate justice). Instead, the protests have been discussed using criminal or extremist framing (for a much deeper analysis, see Meyer et al., 2023), debating, for example, whether this group is an extremist or criminal organization. This framing is driven both by conservative politicians and right-wing media outlets who had already used these frames when discussing the more conventional protests by the Fridays for Future movement. The same frames, with even more extreme claims (i.e., Last Generation members are murderers, they should go to prison), circulated widely on digital media networks. News coverage has included claims by journalists that the climate movement has polarized society — with the only evidence for this being some angry car drivers trying to push or pull the protesters from the streets. The protesters themselves have remained non-violent and their political demands have been modest: speed limits, cheaper tickets for public transport, etc.

Both professional journalism and digital platform providers could do much more in order to avoid the harmful dynamics of polarization by (1) refocusing the public's attention on the bridges that connect a pluralistic society (such as the broad support for climate protection in society), and by (2) featuring bridge-builders more prominently than destroyers of bridges (e.g., moderate critics of the protesters who nonetheless support the general legitimacy of protest). This would entail (3) *not* rewarding aggressive statements directed at the respective outgroup with media attention and (4) welcoming radical ideas, in the original sense of the word, i.e., ideas that relate to the roots of a problem. Ultimately, this may not only help to contain destructive dynamics of unconstrained polarization but would also make for better journalism and a more rewarding experience for media users. Both outcomes may actually be strong arguments for media managers and journalists to rethink current professional practices.

In the following, I will focus specifically on polarization as a challenge to liberal democracies and much of the reasoning will not apply to authoritarian regimes, where freedom of the press and rule of law are not

(fully) granted. I will first explain the discursive dimension of polarization, why it may be harmful to democracy, and what kind of depolarization we should strive for. I will then argue that the logics of journalism and social media networks need to evolve in order to limit polarization. Finally, I will elaborate my suggestions on how the media could do better.

What Is Discursive Polarization and Is It Harmful?

I argue that polarization is a meta-process of social divergence: it is the process behind different indicators, which, only when taken together, are sufficient for the diagnosis of “polarization” (Brüggemann and Meyer, 2023). The two main dimensions of polarization are the ideological and the affective dimensions (e.g., as summarized in Kubin and Sikorski, 2021). Polarization thus comprises the combination of (1) rising disagreements between large camps in society on a whole set of issues and (2) increasing antipathy between the different camps. The disagreements concern values and policy aims and means, but also what can be considered relevant facts, such as the necessity for rapid and massive reduction of carbon dioxide and methane emissions to mitigate climate change.

Disagreements as such are not a problem because they are part of any pluralistic democratic society: different worldviews and different interests may clash and not all conflicts can be resolved. Yet, polarization, if uncontained, may ultimately tear society apart and damage the legitimacy and effectiveness of the democratic decision-making process, if e.g., the willingness of the minority to accept majority rule or the respect for guaranteeing basic rights to minorities in society can no longer be taken for granted.

The two dimensions of polarization vary in how much they are likely to damage democracy: ideological polarization (increasingly different opinions) may be less harmful than increasing affective polarization.

The introduction of more radical ideas may not necessarily hurt the democratic quality of debates. Sometimes debates lack ideas that are radical, those that get to the roots of a given problem. This is certainly the case for many debates around climate change and the truth does not

lie in the middle (anthropogenic climate change *does* exist, and not just a little bit), nor are real solutions to be found in modest, small steps (a bit of climate protection will not be sufficient).

Affective polarization, on the other hand, as in toxic language that hurts an outgroup or is designed to provoke aggression towards an outgroup, can hardly be justified as somehow fostering democracy.

How Does the Media Contribute to Polarization?

Much past research was based on surveys exploring polarization in the minds of people, yet it is also worthwhile to explore how polarization evolves in communication, a concept that I have called “discursive polarization” (Brüggemann and Meyer, 2023). How and why do debates fall apart? This is important because communication (discursive polarization) impacts the minds of people, ultimately resulting in action and — sometimes — even violence.

Political actors who strategically stoke conflict and demonize their opponents for political gain are often the drivers behind the polarization of debates. Yet, in this essay, I will temporarily ignore the Donald Trumps of this world (he is not unique) and instead focus on some of the actors that have contributed to making him and his fellow populists great (again): journalists and social media platform providers. How have they contributed to polarization and could they undo some of it?

The media facilitated Donald Trump’s rise by doing what they always do: following their professional or algorithmic logics. It is notable that both news and digital networks push public debates in the same direction: providing most salience to a very limited number of extreme voices engaged in a simplified conflict of pro and con. Conflict, surprise, negativity, and simplicity are factors that have shaped journalistic reporting at least since Walter Lippmann came up with the concept of news value a hundred years ago. In addition, journalistic norms emphasize balance as part of the overarching concept of objectivity, which leads to a search for two dueling sides on every issue and to an overemphasis of fringe statements, e.g., the denial of climate change (Brüggemann and Engesser, 2017).

All this is also due to the market logic of commercial media and the need to maximize audiences by playing into the general psychological dispositions of human attention. Commercial interests have also led digital platforms to exploit the psychological dispositions of their users. The aim of Facebook and co. seems not so much to benefit users (or society at large) but to trick users into maximizing the amount of time spent on the platform in order to sell targeted advertising, and to collect and sell user data (Zuboff, 2019). Platforms do so by providing content that users “engage” with. This engagement may take the form of reasoned debate but it could also be the exchange of anger or hate speech. This silences moderate voices on social media and leads to news avoidance among parts of the news audience (Bail, 2021).

For those who read social network posts and consume news, they encounter an image of a divided society presented as media content by journalists either claiming that society is increasingly polarized, or by focusing on conflict and negativity and by providing an outlet for extreme fringe voices. This creates a distorted image of society and of the extremeness of the respective outgroup. This distortion is well-documented for the United States, where the public falsely attributes extreme attributes and attitudes to Republican and Democrat partisans (Fernbach and van Boven, 2022).

Could News Media and Digital Platforms Change and Limit Polarization?

So, if all of this is rooted within the DNA of social networks and journalism and ultimately in a commercialized media system and human psychology at large, then there is obviously no simple and quick fix. But is there anything that can be done? Can media change what they do?

Deeper structural reforms of the media system at large (stronger support for public and non-profit media organizations, breaking up giant social media platform providers such as Meta and Alphabet, democratizing media organizations, etc.) would be desirable for less polarized media debates and for better functioning of democracy. Yet, these structural

transformations are unlikely to happen soon and are not the focus of this essay. Instead, here, I will provide recommendations for changing media practices that can take place within the context of current media systems.¹

Even in the current system, news media and platform providers may at some point understand that a good user experience as offered by constructive and inspiring debates about relevant issues may actually also pay off as a business model. Facebook and Twitter are losing users to other platforms, and there might be a chance for new approaches towards creating positive user interactions (although for Twitter, we will have to wait for the demise of Elon Musk). For journalism, change may also be motivated by the desire to do better journalism and to create a community through a positive user experience. Journalism is a practice, a professional culture, that does not change quickly, but can change over time.

Change would have to be driven by management, staff, and media users. The fact that the responsibility for fueling the dynamics of polarization is shared does not mean that there is no individual agency. Obviously top management is in a better position to instigate change in hierarchical organizations: digital media platforms and media outlets are not governed democratically and this is part of the problem. So, while it is true that the current platforms and organizations should be democratized, replacing their owners and managers by democratically controlled bodies would solve many problems, but it is not likely to happen any time soon. But media users are super powerful both as subscribers to news media and also as owners of their own time and attention budgets that they might want to spend on a given digital platform. Also, everyone is responsible for which posts they like and circulate: is it a post that spreads contempt towards an outgroup or a constructive idea to address a relevant social problem?

¹ One may also note that, even among Western countries, media systems vary considerably, e.g., as to their degree of commercialization and the prevalence of hyper-partisan media outlets. Both aspects are likely to enhance polarization. It is plausible that the high degree of polarization in the United States is also (although not exclusively) a result of its hyper-commercialized and partisan media system.

If we think about a less polarized and less polarizing media debate, media content should obviously not turn a blind eye to problems and conflicts. Yet, reporting and identifying what's wrong in society can only be the starting point for good journalism and debate. Both journalism and social media debates may also provide a perspective on common ground in society, establishing which values, rules, and perceptions of facts are effectively shared. Media professionals can try to refocus debates as a quest for solutions to social problems. More concretely, I would like to make four recommendations.²

Firstly, journalists and all professional moderators of media debates could aim to *refocus the public's attention on the bridges that connect a pluralistic society*, e.g., reminding us that virtually everyone agrees on the “if” of climate protection and the debate is only about the “how.” Areas of agreement can be explicitly pointed out rather than only highlighting questions of contention. Building bridges also means searching for solutions. Journalism and algorithms may help moderate the search for common ground — but both need reprogramming to do this, which involves changing the routine rules of how they work and what they do. In journalism research, helpful concepts have been developed and applied in practice — such as constructive journalism and solutions journalism — concepts aimed at refocusing reporting on ways out of a given crisis rather than only reporting on the symptoms of the crisis or the most outrageous statements or interactions in a conflict. One important path forward

- 2 The program that I chaired at THE NEW INSTITUTE (Depolarizing Public Debates, Developing the Tools for Transformative Communication) has developed a longer list of recommendations with more elaboration, which has been published as the “Hamburg Impulses” on the website www.transformativecommunication.net. This essay heavily draws on ideas discussed within the program. I would like to thank the members of this program – Hartmut Wessler, Shota Gelovani, Fritz Breithaupt, Ashley Muddiman, Hendrik Meyer, and Louisa Pröschel, as well as short-term visitors Christel von Eck, Dag Elgesem, and Lisa Argyle – for their input into what desirable depolarization is and what could be done to achieve it.

would be to focus more on issues rather than on *who* presented the idea and *how* was it presented. Returning to how disruptive climate protests are covered: reporting and social media have been more focused on the way protesters have protested rather than on their actual propositions (Meyer et al., 2023). Focusing on actual positions reveals that the recent climate protests in Germany organized by the provocatively named Last Generation presented fairly moderate demands.

Secondly, *bridge-builders rather than polarizing figures could be given a voice* in mediated discussions and featured more prominently, e.g., actors that do not clearly reside in a given ideological camp but open up a new perspective or reach out across camps. Interpretive reporting is a journalistic strategy that actively contextualizes fringe voices or even leaves out irrelevant positions, like the denial of basic facts (for an overview of these new role orientations, see Brüggemann, 2017). Polarizing actors are thereby toned down or put into context. This function of journalism is not new: only some voices could be quoted in a traditional newspaper article or on the evening TV news, just as only some Tweets are retweeted a million times. Therefore, the issue is not about silencing voices, but rather deciding the criteria of relevance and making relevant voices more salient.

Thirdly, *aggressive statements by public figures should not be rewarded with media attention*. This runs counter to the journalistic intuition to select issues and statements according to what is likely to draw public attention. Aggression does draw attention — but it is neither always relevant nor helpful in debates that aim to constructively address social problems. Here journalists would have to exercise deliberate constraint.

Social media platforms could retrain their algorithms to search not only for any kind of user activity, but also (and perhaps especially) for constructive dialogue and substantial information. Algorithms can already identify clear cases of incivility (Frimer et al., 2023) and current advances in artificial intelligence suggest that they will be able to discover both constructive interaction and destructive trolling on social media in a much better way in the near future. A deliberativeness algorithm could even moderate discussions and encourage depolarizing exchanges by fostering democratic listening, prompting users to listen and react to the ideas proposed by others (Argyle et al., 2023; Wessler, 2020).

Finally, *debates should not avoid ideas that are radical in the original sense of the word, as in addressing the roots of a problem*, e.g., if the economic system is harmful to democracy or not compatible with the principles of justice and sustainability, then a reformed economic order might be discussed even though it would entail far-reaching changes. This kind of radical idea should not be conflated with an uncivil tone or otherwise extreme positions (in tone or substance) that severely violate basic democracy-sustaining norms. For example, speakers who deny other speakers the right to participate, who do not respect basic rules (such as the results of votes), or those who continuously attack others (verbally or in physical acts of violence) should be toned down.

Let me be clear that depolarizing debates is not about searching for the truth and good ideas only in the middle among those actors who essentially lobby for business as usual and for maintaining the status quo. So-called business-as-usual (BAU) scenarios in climate research have led to disastrous levels of global heating and ecological turmoil. Advocacy for small steps and slow changes is not a moderate proposition, but rather an extreme suggestion given the urgency of climate action. Climate protesters are often labelled as extremists by liberal-conservative actors, but journalists — as the moderators of public debates — should not buy into this discursive strategy and should instead provide fora for debating ideas and solutions. Depolarization strategies are about encouraging unheard voices that are sharing novel ideas rather than those who shout louder and are more offensive than everyone else.

These strategies may help to defuse the destructive dynamics of unconstrained polarization and also make for better journalism and more rewarding experiences for media users. In fact, media users may actually prefer if media debates focused more constructively on solving relevant problems than attacking the other side. It could also be a strategy for countering news avoidance. This could make for a strong argument for media managers and journalists to rethink their current professional practices.

Changing journalistic and media culture is part of the job of journalists and editors, but also of everyone retweeting or liking a post. Every media user may decide to retweet a toxic statement, a cat picture, or an

interesting idea addressing relevant social problems. Cat pictures are one way to depolarize public debates but this may not be the most helpful strategy to tackle relevant social problems.

What is considered relevant and what is considered a constructive contribution to public debates is of course a normative question and thus should also be subject to open discussion. If journalists or social media networks choose to intervene to contain polarization, they should be transparent about what they do and why they do so. They will be criticized for this and there will be conflicts — but this is all part of a vibrant democracy. Let the conflict be constructive!

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