

# Research report

Forum: UNICEF

Issue: The role of social media in exacerbating political polarisation and its impact on child welfare

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## **Introduction**

In a world where the concept of Social Media seems almost indispensable, society is increasingly confronted with the dragged consequences. This is also the case in the political field, where there is a particular fear of undermining the standards of democracy. This threat is felt not only among unstable governments with fluctuating democratic values, but also among the largest and strongest democracies on the planet. In addition, there are many concerns about the extremism that is being fuelled by Social Media, manifesting itself in a rising polarization. Information can grow to be exaggerated, and companies are responsive to the sensitive mindset of Social Media users. Especially among young people – those who grow up with these types of online platforms – misstatements and misinformation can quickly become predominant in the development of their moral value and the way they express their voices. Incidentally, opinions are divided on this, and a large number of politicians see this as an advantage as they can steer young voters.

## Definitions of key terms

### API

= the Application Program Interface; means by which platforms allow data to be downloaded.

### Hybrid warfare

A conflict with an interconnected group of state and non-state actors pursuing overlapping goals.

### Bots

Automated accounts that post based on algorithms.

### Crosscutting

Selecting particular sequences to make connections across seemingly disparate disciplines or situations.

### Social Media

Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.

### Algorithm

A process or set of rules to be followed in calculations or other problem-solving operations, especially by a computer.

### Hyper Partisan

Extremely biased and in favour of a political party.

## General overview

It is a profound worry; online polarization may be leading to the rise radicalization. Online polarization can take multiple forms: trolling, disinformation, and hate speech. The younger target groups first deviate from the offline world and then fall into the temptation of the extremist groups online; these online environments shape how young-adolescent perceive the political environment as it builds an impression of their supposed opponents. The effect of this manifests itself in a divergence of political opinions, beliefs, attitudes, stances or political adversaries.

One of the dangers of online polarization is the spread of political disinformation. This can be recognized as 'fake news', 'rumors', inadvertently factually correct information, deliberately factually increased information, politically slanted information and hyper partisan news. Political actors make use of such methods to exploit the economics of digital advertising. Social Media has a fast paced nature of the modern information which can be misused for political advantage. Its most prominent victims are younger users with voting right, but governments and other actors cannot be forgotten as they are necessary in decision-making. Trolling is another strategy used to shape the thinking of users. In particular, this causes dehumanization towards political adversaries as users are unwilling to engage with them in day-to-day interactions. Public trust is degrading, whilst division, resentment and fear is amplified. The latter leads to decrease in well-being and satisfaction among the victims of polarization. There is, of course, another side to the story. A bunch of politicians and elected officials consider higher levels of polarization to be a benefit. It grants them a position from where they are able to keep up with political participation, predict the perception of electoral choices and centralize power. They can also sow distrust in established media orgs to help spotlight less credible sources. Eventually digital disinformation may inspire real-world action.

Data makes everything even more complicated. A lack of data is caused when necessary information is sold or when it is being withheld by for-profit companies. The collected information can also be hidden for privacy reasons. Bots ease the spread of misinformation, as they are highly active automatic accounts that are designed to gather information and potentially push out forms of political censorship. This type of behavior is mostly recognized in authoritarian governments where this strategy is used to influence elections beyond borders.

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## Major parties involved\*

### *United States of America*

The USA has experienced a greater surge in ideological polarization and affective polarization than comparable democracies. Certain topics raise more partisanship than others. Climate change (environment protection), reforming gun policy and military strength have had great effect.

### *South Korea*

Political Media use has increasingly appealed to citizens. Korea demonstrated the lowest levels of trust in relation to the news overall.

### *China*

The overarching division in Chinese society is split between nationalism and cultural liberalism. The state's ideology dominates the political apparati through all sorts of media, including Social Media.

### *Russia*

There is a widespread concern that Russia (and other countries) have launched social-media campaigns designed to increase political divisions in the United States. A possible motive is to sow dissonance among the population.

*\*Note: numerous parties are included in the issue of Political Polarization through Social Media. It is a global issue that is tearing at the seams of democracies around the world.*

## **Possible solutions**

When looking at solving the above problems, a particular focus should be placed on promoting direct participation in democracy by citizens, so that that trust can be restored. A working level of trust is extremely effective.

In addition, there are a number of restrictions to impose. The concept of bots and other algorithm focused machines should be stressed. The collection of data that is managed by Social Media (and used to respond to user behavior), which is currently not yet available for scientific research, is relevant for resolving. From this it can be deduced whether false (or even worse, indoctrinating) information is being spread, and how intense the numbers are.

It is also advisable to spread awareness, so that younger and newer users know the consequences and impact of incorrect information spread through Social Media. Once citizens are made aware, they will be less vulnerable for political disinformation and its corresponding behavior.

## Further reading

(links with general information on online polarisation:)

i. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev-polisci-100711-135242>

ii. <https://academic.oup.com/poq/article-abstract/76/3/405/1894274?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>

iii. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.2307/2130780>

iv. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1017/S0022381608080493>

## Bibliography

Kubin, E., & Von Sikorski, C. (2021). The role of (social) media in political polarization: a systematic review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 45(3), 188–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070>

Levy, G., & Razin, R. (2020). Social media and political polarisation. *LSE Public Policy Review*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseprr.5>

McLaughlin, B. (2018). Commitment to the team. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 30(1), 41–51. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000176>

*Onderzoek online polarisering*. (n.d.). Hannah Arendt Instituut. <https://hannah-arendt.instituut/wat-we-doen/onderzoek/onderzoek-online-polarisering/>

Tucker, J. A., Guess, A. M., Barberá, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A. A., Sanovich, S., Стукал, Д., & Nyhan, B. (2018). Social Media, Political polarization, and Political Disinformation: A review of the Scientific literature. *Social Science Research Network*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3144139>