

# Social Media and Public Opinion Formation: Information Dissemination and Polarization

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## ABSTRACT

Social media plays an important role in shaping public opinion, especially when it comes to the rapid spread of information and algorithms that reinforce polarization. With the proliferation of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, information can be disseminated in seconds, but often without adequate verification. In addition, algorithms used by social media platforms personalize content based on user behavior, exacerbating the echo chamber effect and increasing polarization. The spread of fake news and unverified information on social media adds to mistrust and social tension in society. The resulting polarization deepens differences in political ideologies, while the intensification of group identities makes open discussion increasingly difficult. Social media also has the potential to facilitate social engagement if used wisely. Efforts are needed to improve media literacy, ensure algorithm transparency, and verify information so that people can access more accurate and healthy information.

## INTRODUCTION

Social media in the current era has developed into one of the main tools in shaping public opinion. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube provide space for individuals and groups to share information, opinions and news widely and quickly. The presence of social media allows people to interact directly with various ongoing issues, be it on a local or global scale. This process has changed the way people obtain information and form their opinions on various matters, from politics to social issues. Information spread on social media, which often does not go through rigorous filtering, plays a major role in influencing the way the public thinks about a topic.

Social media also facilitates the creation of spaces for discussion and debate involving various groups and individuals. This provides an opportunity for many people to be more involved in the process of shaping public opinion. Social media allows for faster and more efficient dissemination of information, with a very wide reach. Social media has positive potential in democratizing information, but it is also often criticized for its role in spreading disinformation, hoaxes and polarizing opinions.

This phenomenon shows that while social media can expand the space for discussion, its impact on public opinion depends largely on how the information is produced, disseminated and received by users.

One of the main problems with the role of social media in shaping public opinion is the dissemination of information that is not always accurate and accountable. Fake news or hoaxes often spread faster than valid news, due to the viral nature of social media itself. Unverified information can influence public opinion in a misleading way. This is especially dangerous in the political sphere, where hoaxes can influence elections and create polarization among the public (Friggeri et al., 2014). Social media not only acts as an information channel, but also as a platform for opinion manipulation that can undermine the quality of information received by the public.

The algorithms used by social media platforms also play a large role in shaping public opinion. These algorithms display content based on users' past interactions, often reinforcing the echo chamber effect by exposing them only to information that confirms their views. This creates sharp polarization, trapping individuals and groups in an information bubble that limits their perspective.

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When information is filtered and tailored to individual preferences, users lose the opportunity to get more diverse and objective information. Algorithmic filters on social media can intensify differences of opinion and exacerbate existing social tensions (Pariser, 2011). While social media provides freedom of expression, it can also exacerbate fragmentation in society and reinforce polarized opinions.

Observing the role of social media in shaping public opinion has become very important amid the rapid development of information technology. It is important to understand how these media can influence the way people think and make decisions with the increasing use of social media as a primary source of information by the public. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube provide quick and broad access to news and content from a variety of sources, but can also shape individuals' views based on algorithms tailored to their preferences. Understanding the impact of social media can help people be wiser in consuming information and reduce the negative effects of disinformation and polarization. It also provides insights for policymakers to formulate regulations that can govern the dissemination of information on digital platforms to be more accountable and responsible.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how social media influence public opinion, especially in relation to the rapid spread of information and the role of algorithms in amplifying polarization. By understanding these dynamics, it is hoped that ways can be found to improve the quality of information received by the public and mitigate the negative impact of disinformation that often occurs on social media platforms.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The literature study approach is a method used to extract information from various written sources relevant to the topic under study, in this case the role of social media in shaping public opinion. This literature study aims to analyze previous findings related to how social media affects public opinion and how social media platform algorithms can reinforce polarization. The desk research approach will not only gather existing theories and concepts, but will also identify trends, relationships, and debates that have occurred in previous research. This method allows for a clearer picture of the development of thinking in social media studies, as well as understanding how digital platforms play a role in the distribution of information and its influence on the public (Levy, 2017).

This literature review also provides an opportunity to explore the various perspectives that exist regarding the use of social media as a public opinion shaping tool. Some studies may focus on the psychological aspects of users, while others may highlight the social and political impacts of social media. Through this approach, researchers can identify gaps in the existing literature and formulate new research questions. The sources used in this study come from scientific journals, books, reports of international organizations, as well as articles published by experts in the fields of communication, sociology, and technology (Tufekci, 2015). Thus, the literature review provides a solid basis for analyzing and evaluating how social media can shape public opinion and identifying the factors that influence this dynamic.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social media has revolutionized the way we interact with information and each other. Along with its rapid growth, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others have become the main channels for sharing information, opinions and news. One of the most striking aspects of social media is its ability to spread information at an incredible speed. News or opinions can spread around the world within seconds, affecting millions of people. This dissemination process, which often does not go through the rigorous editorial filtering of traditional media, allows for more diverse information, but can also exacerbate the spread of false or inaccurate information. Social media serves not only as a communication channel, but also as an arena for rapid public opinion formation (Bakshy et al., 2015). The platform allows for open discussion on a wide range of topics, which often sparks public debate and influences people's views. Social media is not just a means to share information, but also plays a huge role in shaping public opinion and creating a more polarized social reality.

The rapid spread of information through social media is greatly influenced by the algorithms used by these platforms. These algorithms are designed to tailor the content shown to users based on their preferences and previous behavior. This leads to so-called "echo chambers," where individuals are only exposed to information that aligns with their own views. This algorithm reinforces users' biases, creating isolated spaces that make them even more polarized. As a result, public opinion becomes fragmented, with groups finding it more difficult to communicate or understand others' perspectives. This pattern becomes more pronounced in a political context, where social media platforms often exacerbate polarization among the public (Pariser, 2011).

Social media algorithms not only accelerate the spread of information, but also determine the type of information received by individuals. Each social media platform uses algorithms that personalize content based on user preferences, previous interactions, and behavior. Social media plays an important role in shaping what the public considers “true”. Content that invites more interaction, such as comments, likes and shares, is more likely to appear on users' timelines. This often creates a positive feedback loop for controversial or emotional information, which has the potential to attract the attention of more people. For example, sensationalized news or information that evokes fear or anger can spread faster than more objective and rational information. As a result, more emotionally arousing information often dominates public opinion, exacerbating social tensions and accelerating polarization (Vosoughi et al., 2018). While social media algorithms can speed up access to information, the impact of spreading emotional and controversial content can exacerbate tensions and shape polarized public opinion.

The polarization exacerbated by social media can be clearly seen in the political context. Social media has become a key battleground in political campaigns, where information is often tailored to the ideologies of specific voters. This exacerbates existing political divisions, deepening the differences between groups that hold different political views. Research shows that the dissemination of highly segmented information on social media platforms can increase tensions between these groups, as each group feels increasingly isolated from the other. With algorithms that personalize the user experience, social media accelerates polarization by allowing individuals to only be exposed to information that matches their views, without listening to dissenting views (Bail et al., 2018). Social media has also played an important role in exacerbating polarization, deepening political divisions, and reducing opportunities for societal understanding.

Social media not only exacerbates political polarization, but can also reinforce group identity. When people join groups or online communities that share similar views, they often feel more connected to others who share similar beliefs. This phenomenon can also lead to increased intolerance towards different groups. This group identity is reinforced through interactions on social media, where users often feel hindered by the limitations of algorithms that only provide information that matches their views. This causes people to become more committed in their views and more closed to the views of others (Kleinberg et al., 2017).

As a major channel of communication, social media allows people to spread their opinions freely, but it also creates challenges in terms of information verification. A lot of news or opinions circulating on social media do not go through a rigorous fact-checking process, which makes them vulnerable to disinformation and hoaxes. The spread of misinformation can quickly form a false public opinion, and is more difficult to correct due to the viral nature of social media. This misinformation can cause distrust in legitimate institutions, exacerbate social tensions, and even influence important political or economic decisions. The quality of information circulating on social media is a major concern in the formation of public opinion (Friggeri, et al., 2014).

The existence of social media has had a positive impact in terms of public participation. Social media allows individuals from diverse backgrounds to speak, debate and voice their opinions in a way that traditional media does not allow. However, this participation is often limited to like-minded groups, which exacerbates polarization rather than facilitating productive dialogue. When individuals only interact with people who share their views, it hinders the creation of an inclusive and open discussion space. This unbalanced discussion further exacerbates the polarization of public opinion, widening the social divide (Tufekci, 2015).

The role of social media in shaping public opinion is also closely related to the speed and reach of information dissemination. Social media platforms allow information to spread faster than traditional media, leading to public opinion being formed in a shorter period of time. However, in this speed, the accuracy and precision of information is often overlooked. Many individuals share information without checking its veracity first, creating a cycle of spreading false or unverified information. In this case, although social media accelerates opinion formation, the quality of information conveyed remains a major issue that needs to be addressed (Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

The impact of social media on public opinion is also influenced by social and psychological factors. Humans tend to trust more information that conforms to their own views and ignore information that contradicts them. This is exacerbated by the effect of “confirmation bias,” where people seek information that confirms their existing views. On social media platforms, this creates an information loop where everyone is trapped in an isolated space that reinforces their beliefs, exacerbating polarization. When this happens on a large scale, society becomes more segregated, with groups not understanding each other's views (Friggeri et al., 2014).

While social media provides freedom of expression, these platforms often trigger extreme emotions. Content that provokes anger or hatred is more likely to be shared and receive more attention. This is because social media algorithms prioritize content that can trigger emotional reactions, which increases the visibility of such content. Inciting or provocative content has the potential to spread wider and faster, exacerbating social polarization and creating tension between different groups. When social or political groups are exposed only to content that aligns with their views and is often emotional, this further deepens their differences with other groups who hold different views. This can lead to greater social conflict (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Overall, while social media has a lot of potential to increase community engagement and expand access to information, it also carries great risks with regard to shaping public opinion. The rapid spread of information, filtering algorithms, and the potential to exacerbate polarization require further attention. For social media to function in a more positive way in the formation of public opinion, there needs to be efforts to improve media literacy among users and to ensure that information disseminated is accountable and verifiable.

## CONCLUSION

Social media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, particularly through its rapid information dissemination process and the use of algorithms that personalize content for its users. This process makes it easier for communities to get real-time information, be it related to political, social or cultural issues. The speed of information dissemination on social media allows public opinion to be formed in a short period of time, but it also carries a great risk in terms of information accuracy. Algorithmic selection processes that prioritize more emotional and reaction-inducing content can exacerbate social polarization, creating isolated spaces where individuals are only exposed to views that align with their beliefs. While these platforms provide freedom of expression, they also lead to the spread of hoaxes and disinformation that can negatively affect public perception. Social media provides wide access to information and opinions along with great challenges.

To address this issue, it is important for social media platforms to be more responsible in distributing information, including by increasing algorithm transparency and supporting fact verification. Users also need to be more aware of potential bias and disinformation, by improving their media literacy. Collaboration between policymakers, tech companies and the public needed to create a healthier information space on social media. A more thoughtful approach to social media use can help prevent further polarization and create a more inclusive society for discussion and sharing opinions.

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