

Examining And Combating Political Polarization Caused By The News Media

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Abstract

This paper first examines the evidence for political polarization in the United States, including how it has manifest itself in the media, and its potential consequences. Having established the problem, it looks at various psychological biases that contribute to it. Finally, it turns to potential solutions, examining the Fairness Doctrine (one attempted US regulatory solution) and concluding by briefly outlining the design of a digital product that might succeed at fighting polarization where regulatory approaches have failed.

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This paper by [Ethan Resnick](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](#). Build the product I'm proposing. Copy this work and put it into future business plans or whatever. I don't care; I just want these ideas to make some positive impact on the news landscape.

Evidence of Polarization and Its Threat to Collective Action

In order to make collective decisions as a nation, average citizens must know and agree on the facts and engage in serious debate. Doing so produces a level of agreement and direction that's otherwise absent, because it reveals less-desirable (e.g. less-viable or less-justified) options as such and therefore weeds them out.¹

We desperately need this ability to make productive collective decisions in order to tackle the huge issues we face, ranging from the Great Recession to global warming. But we don't have it.

On the contrary, the government has almost shut down four times in the past two years, including from one budget fight that brought the country to the brink of default when Republicans objected to raising the debt ceiling—an unprecedented move, as the ceiling had previously been raised dozens of times over both parties without fanfare, and one that revealed deep ideological differences about the role of government, according to *The New York Times* (2011a).

This trend towards deeper divides is driven by Americans self-segregating according to their political leanings. When self-segregation occurs, a citizen is constantly told by his cohort that his views are superior to his opposition's and he is exposed to little

¹ There will likely always be disagreement over how to weight fundamental dimensions of ethics. Along those lines, one study found that self-identified conservatives in the US gave more moral weight to respecting authority whereas self-identified liberals gave more weight to treating everyone equally (Haidt and Graham, 2007). To the extent that we can't definitively deem one of these perspectives "right", political debate can't produce total agreement—no matter how well it establishes the facts. However, these profound disagreements are irrelevant until we've tackled the disagreement that comes from "lower hanging fruit", like poor or incomplete information, or arguments with logical fallacies.

contradicting information that might highlight errors in his thinking. As a result, he grows more sure of his position and Americans who disagree become “culturally incomprehensible” (Bill Bishop in *The Economist*, 2008) and less trustworthy. And, accordingly, he tends to vote for “more extreme members of Congress [who] cannot reach the necessary consensus to fix long-term problems such as the tottering pensions and health-care systems” (*The Economist*, 2008).

The evidence for self-segregation is strong. In the 1976 presidential election, only 26.8% of Americans lived in landslide counties (i.e. ones that voted either Democratic or Republican by a margin of 20 points or more); by the 2008 election, 47.6% of Americans lived in such areas (Stolberg, 2011). In addition, many major news outlets have taken on increasingly partisan viewerships, according to a report by The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (2010). And the percentage of Americans who know say they prefer getting news that shares their political view went up in 2010, the same report found.²

² The number, at 25%, could be seen as still fairly low. But 25% of the electorate is still a massive chunk. Further, even among the 62% of Americans who state a preference for non-partisan news, the number of people who actually act accordingly is likely smaller. For example, Fox news, the most-watched cable news programming (The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism [Pew], 2010), has an audience that’s composed of self-identified Tea Party supporters in twice the percentage as in the general population (52% vs. 25%), and self-identified Christian Conservatives and NRA members in roughly one and a half times the general population (63% vs. 43% and 60% vs 40% respectively). In all, a Fox News viewer is 1.5–2 times as likely to identify as a Republican or a Conservative as is a member of the general population. On the other side, New York Times readers were similarly more likely to identify as Democrats or Liberals than the general population.

The shift to more segregated media consumption may be attributed to be three events in the 1980s that, together, increased the range and amount of political news coverage by breaking the hold of “The Big Three” (NBC, CBS, and ABC), who, in 1980, had combined to receive over 90% of prime-time viewership (Hindman and Weigland, 2008). First, cable news grew in prominence, offering consumers a greatly-expanded range of channels (Markwordt, 2009). Second, Fox was founded in 1986, and it would go on to become the first major challenger to the “Big Three”, even taking the number one spot in the 2007–2008 season. Third, the Fairness Doctrine was repealed in 1987, leading to more, and more-partisan, presentations of political news (Markwordt, 2009).

As a result of these shifts, the Big Three’s market share fell to only 32% by 2005 (Hindman and Weigland, 2008). In 1968, the Big Three’s influence was so strong that President Lyndon Johnson told his aides: “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle America” (Markwordt, 2009). By 1987, that influence had wained somewhat but 11% of Americans still rated CBS’s Dan Rather as their favorite journalist. But by 2007, only 5% of Americans rated Katie Couric as their favorite journalist, and that was a higher percentage of the public than any other journalist received.

In their heyday, the Big Three’s programs united the country around a shared set of facts and debates. And because the programs needed to be widely appealing (in order to maintain their high market share), that set of facts was fairly politically neutral.³ But as more channels emerged and the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine unleashed the full

³ Note that this is, to some degree, conjecture. It is based on the low number of Fairness Doctrine complaints filed against the stations during the Big Three’s dominance (Markwordt, 2009) but not on an objective analysis of the programming in any sense, which I was unable to find.

spectrum of political debate, The Big Three's neutral casts were replaced with more partisan alternatives for many Americans, who began to go off in their own, segregated directions. This explosion in programming was arguably good because it led to a greater diversity of opinions being covered, but it also allowed Americans to hear only that which they agreed with—and that's what they did, largely for the psychological reasons discussed below.

Today, the fear is that, with the Internet allowing users to create even more personalized sources of news (e.g. through services like Twitter and Facebook, which only show stories that a user's friends have shared, and services like Digg, which can be set up to behave similarly), this trend towards political fragmentation will only grow stronger, putting the stability of our country at risk.

Psychological Causes of Polarization

Psychological theory reveals two main categories of bias that are responsible for polarization. I'll define each one briefly below before taking a more in-depth look at it.

First, selective exposure is the tendency to view more information that's consistent with one's existing beliefs (Frey, 1986) than information that opposes those beliefs.⁴ It's composed of two sub-biases, confirmation bias (the tendency to actively gravitate towards information that agrees with your position) and defensive avoidance (the tendency to

⁴ Both Lowin (1967) and Taber and Lodge (2006) found a stronger tendency for selective exposure among Republicans than among Democrats; no studies I found observed the opposite. This is far from conclusive, but seems worth noting.

avoid information that disagrees with your position). In general, defensive avoidance is considered to be the weaker force of the two (Garrett and Resnick, 2011).⁵

Second, disconfirmation bias is the tendency to scrutinize opposing arguments more carefully than one scrutinizes arguments that support his or her position (Taber and Lodge, 2006). Crucially, because of disconfirmation bias, even readers who view information that's equally balanced between supporting and opposing arguments will generally become more and more sure of their initial position, still causing polarization (Taber and Lodge, 2006). Again, this is because they'll see the arguments in favor of maintaining their position stronger than they really are.

These biases are driven by the psychological concept of cognitive dissonance⁶, a term coined by Leon Festinger in 1957. Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual holds two logically-incompatible ideas ("cognitions") simultaneously (Frey, 1986). For example, one might hold the cognition that "I am not a cheater" while also holding (recognizing) that "I cheated on the test". Because dissonance is unpleasant, the individual tries to resolve or reduce it. Accordingly, dissonance is a motivational force, which is what makes the theory so useful for predicting how people will behave.

In order to resolve or reduce the dissonance, the individual has a number of options. First, he can change the false cognition (e.g. "I am not a cheater" becomes "At least

⁵ Paul Resnick and I are not related.

⁶ Note that another theory called "self-perception theory" has also been proposed as a competitor to cognitive dissonance. However, for cases of clearly-motivated reasoning, as in political situations, dissonance theory has proven to have more explanatory power (Frey, 1986; Taber and Lodge, 2006).

sometimes, I am a cheater”). When this approach is taken, the truth wins out. However, because maintaining that one is not a cheater is generally important to one’s self-image, the individual is likely not to reject that proposition and to try another dissonance-reduction approach instead.

The model below describes how much dissonance an individual will experience and helps us predict how he or she will react (Wicklund & Brehm, 1976):

Let D be the Set of Cognitions Dissonant to the Cognition Most Resistant to Change

Let C be the Set of Cognitions Consonant to that Cognition

Let importance(X) define how important Cognition X is to the individual

$$Dissonance = \frac{\sum_{i=0}^n D^{(i)} * importance(D^{(i)})}{\sum_{i=0}^n C^{(i)} * importance(C^{(i)})}$$

In other words, dissonance is the sum of all the dissonant terms in the system vis-a-vis the most-fixed term (weighted by importance) divided by the weighted sum of all the consonant terms.

So, to reduce dissonance in the example from before, the individual might add more consonant terms to the system (e.g. by reminding himself “but on the last five tests I didn’t cheat”). Alternatively, the individual might lower the importance of having cheated (e.g. “I didn’t pick that class anyway—it was a requirement—so it doesn’t really matter if I cheat.”).

How dissonance is handled depends on how resistant each of the dissonant beliefs is to change (e.g. being abandoned or toned down), how malleable the importance of each one

is (e.g. through rationalization), and how many more consonant beliefs can be introduced.

That said, we can deduce some general, relevant principles:

1. An individual will experience great dissonance if a position to which he's highly committed is attacked (Frey, 1986). These positions are most resistant to change, meaning that the individual is least likely to accept the truth (e.g. "I am, at least sometimes, a cheater") and most likely to commit some act of denial, justification, or blame instead to resolve the conflict. Conversely, if the individual isn't committed to the position, no dissonance can occur as he or she will simply abandon it upon facing any counterarguments (Frey, 1986). In particular, high-commitment positions often include:
 - a. "Hot" issues (i.e. ones in which the individual is highly motivated to give a certain response), especially issues embedded in one's self-image (Greenwald & Ronis, 1978)
 - b. Past decisions, as these are impossible to change and often hard to deny (Frey, 1986).
2. Dissonance can only occur about an individual's position if they feel that they chose that position freely. If they feel that they were compelled or chose for some other external incentive (e.g. a monetary reward), they won't feel attached to the decision in any deep way so can face counter-information about it with little dissonance (Frey, 1986).

With that general understanding of dissonance theory, we can now look more deeply about the above biases and see how they might affect news media consumption.

Most obviously, on sensitive political issues, individuals will have high motivation to maintain their current position and will therefore tend to select consonant (i.e. agreeable) information when given the choice. The experiments by Taber & Lodge (2006) bear this out: on affirmative action and gun control, individuals chose to view stories that supported their point of view twice as often as they chose to view opposing articles. In many other cases, this selective exposure effect has proven to be equally strong (Frey, 1986). Other studies have shown that individuals will also select opposing (i.e. dissonant) information when they perceive it to be easily refutable (literature review in Frey, 1986; Lowin, 1967 also offers limited support). While this “diversity of exposure” is nice, it’s obviously largely in-name-only.

Disconfirmation bias was also found by Taber & Lodge (2006), with subjects rating arguments that opposed their position as worse than arguments that supported it. They also spent more time reading the opposing arguments (presumably because they were trying to refute them, though they also may simply have needed more time to understand them) and offered more reactions (which were almost all negative) to them, while leaving the supporting arguments largely uncriticized. Perhaps most disturbingly, the more politically astute a subject was, the more he or she rated the supporting arguments as stronger than the opposing arguments, presumably because he or she was able to bring in more outside knowledge to refute the opposing arguments. These astute subjects rated the supporting arguments more highly vis-a-vis the opposing arguments than even the less astute subjects who had much stronger initial opinions did. This implies that simply showing people more news information, unless disconfirmation bias is actively accounted for, is not at all the right solution. Also, as expected by the model, Taber & Lodge were able

to observe polarization as a result of this disconfirmation bias, which previous studies had been unable to do.⁷

Finally, I want to address one non-dissonance-related bias called positive hypothesis testing,⁸ which is the tendency to test one's hypothesis by looking at or inquiring about cases where one expects the hypothesis to hold true, and then seeing if it does (Klayman and Ha, 1987). This is different from confirmation bias in that it's not tied to what the individual believes to be true; he or she can be assigned a hypothesis at random and will still try to assess its truthfulness by inquiring about cases where he or she expects it to be true.

Individuals exhibit this bias because trying to find evidence for a hypothesis usually requires less effort than trying to falsify it, even though the latter produces better conclusions. Because trying to calculate how much information a given diagnostic probe will provide is a hard, if not impossible, cognitive task (Klayman and Ha, 1987), and because positive tests often provide more information in real-world situations anyway, Klayman and Ha (1987) argue, this positive-test bias may not be strictly "irrational".

However, it does lead to some systematic cognitive failings. Namely, when multiple hypotheses fit most or all of the data, individuals are often unable to ask the falsifying

⁷ Tabor & Lodge hypothesized, before doing their experiment, that this was because those studies hadn't used "hot" enough issues to spark dissonance.

⁸ Confusingly, positive hypothesis testing is sometimes also called confirmation bias because the individual has a bias toward trying to confirm the hypothesis (i.e. find evidence for it) rather than trying to falsify it. However, it's important to differentiate this from what I've defined as confirmation bias, as they're caused by very different psychological forces (dissonance theory for confirmation bias and conservation of energy for positive hypothesis testing).

questions (or conduct the falsifying experiments) that would be needed to determine which hypothesis is correct.

In the context of news, this bias points to the incredible importance of true debate in which the candidates go against each other rather than talk over each other. It's easy for one to make a hypothesis on a complex issue (e.g. tax reform) and then find considerable evidence that bears that out. But even the presence of an infinite amount of supporting evidence doesn't guarantee that one has made the correct hypothesis.⁹ A hypothesis' correctness is determined instead by whether there is any evidence that falsifies it. And this is the virtue of true debate: the candidates' entire goal is to falsify the hypotheses/arguments of their opponents.

The Fairness Doctrine

The Fairness Doctrine was an FCC regulation that was first definitively stated in 1949 (Markwordt, 2009). On the premise that the airwaves were limited¹⁰, it mandated that

⁹ This can be seen from the initial study that found positive hypothesis testing strategies (Wason, 1960). In that experiment, subjects were presented with the numbers (2, 4, 6) which they were told were determined by a rule. They were then asked to offer more triples (e.g. 4, 6, 8) and the experimenter would tell them whether those triples fit the rule. Then they were asked to guess the rule. In the experiment the rule was "any three numbers in ascending order", yet almost no participants were able to determine it. More importantly, while an infinite number of cases could be found that supported the rule of "three numbers increasing by 2" (e.g. 4, 6, 8; 8, 10, 12; 12, 14, 16; etc), this was not, in fact, the rule.

¹⁰ I.e. as there is only a certain amount of available spectrum, one person broadcasts to the exclusion of another, unlike in print. And this is a physical, unbridgeable resource constraint as opposed to say, the economic constraints of starting a newspaper, which might be better characterized as hurdles. And when a Florida "right-to-reply" rule that obligated newspapers to

broadcasters operate in the public interest in order to get a license. That public-interest requirement included two things.

First, broadcasters had to devote a percentage of their coverage to controversial issues of public importance (with a special weight given to issues relevant to the community that the broadcaster served; accordingly, broadcasters had to conduct community surveys to figure out what those issues were) (Markwordt, 2009).

Second, broadcasters had to present “all responsible positions” on those issues. This requirement included offering free air time to “responsible groups” with alternative views (Markwordt, 2009). That said, it did not require broadcasters to give equal time to all views, as long as they represented each one in an honest, equitable, and balanced way (Hagey, 2011).

In addition, the Doctrine included a personal-attack rule (not formalized until 1967) that required stations to notify anyone they attacked, and offer that person a tape, transcript or summary of the attack and free airtime with which to respond. And it included a political-editorial rule that required stations to give free airtime to the opponents of political candidates they endorsed (Stern, 2000).

In 1969, the Doctrine’s constitutionality was challenged on First Amendment grounds. The Supreme Court agreed with the FCC that, in light of the scarcity of the airwaves, the Fairness Doctrine actually “enhance[d] rather than abridge[d] the freedoms of speech and press protected by the First Amendment” in that it helped ensure the minority view would be heard, while the stations would still be able to say anything they

print the replies of people they attacked was ruled unconstitutional by the Court a few years later, the Fairness Doctrine’s continued constitutionality hinged on this scarcity distinction.

wanted (*Red Lion Broadcasting Co., Inc., et al v. Federal Communications Commission, et al.*, 1969). This allowed the Doctrine to stay in effect until 1987, when the FCC decided to stop enforcing it under strong pressure from President Reagan and in spite of strong, bipartisan support for the Doctrine in both houses of Congress (Boyer, 1987). The last provisions of the Doctrine (the personal-attack rule and the political-editorial rule) were thrown out in 2000 by a U.S. Court of Appeals (Stern, 2000).

While the Fairness Doctrine is now defunct, the goal of balanced coverage in the public interest is an admirable one. Accordingly, a number of Democrats have pushed to bring the Fairness Doctrine back (Markwordt, 2009). However, President Obama opposes this move, as do almost all Republicans, and it looks highly unlikely that the Doctrine could return (Hagey, 2011).

Moreover, bringing back the Doctrine in its past form would likely not be a good idea, as its implementation was horribly flawed.

First, there is some evidence that it created a chilling effect in which stations simply decided not to cover/editorialize on political issues, because they knew that they would be at risk of incurring the huge costs of: 1) any fairness lawsuits, even if they were vindicated, and 2) the free air time that the opposing side would likely request, which they might not be able to sell ads against (Markwordt, 2009). Further, covering political issues beyond “the facts” opened them up to the risk of losing their license in the low-probability-high-cost event that the FCC deemed their coverage was biased.

More damningly, a large, stakeholder could prevent a station from covering an issue that the station believed to be in the public interest by requesting (or threatening to request) so much free time from it or threatening it with an FCC complaint. Markwordt

(2009) provides evidence that the Kennedy and Nixon administrations both used these tactics to influence the media, which is incredibly scary. One of Nixon's staff, after meeting with executives from the Big Three said: they're "terribly nervous over the uncertain state of the [FCC regulations]...and scared".

In addition, the FCC only required broadcasters to present the two most popular views on an issue (presenting other views was at the station's discretion, depending on how substantial they believed those views to be). This, ironically, created an incentive for broadcasters not to seek out some minority views, as that would make it harder for them to deny free air time to other minority groups. That said, I found no evidence that this particular incentive ever moved beyond the realm of theory to influence a broadcaster's programming.

Finally, the FCC did not require the opposing views to be presented in the same program; it was only the network's overall programming that needed to be balanced (Markwordt, 2009). From a selective exposure perspective, this dramatically weakened the efficacy of the Doctrine as viewers would have the option to watch what the programs they agreed with while ignoring the one they didn't.

So, while the Fairness Doctrine may have prevented the outrageous, often misrepresentative, claims that some networks make now, it also likely "dampen[ed] the vigor and limits the variety of public debate".¹¹

¹¹ From the Supreme Court opinion in *Miami Herald Publishing v. Tornillo*, a case that followed *Red Lion* and struck down, for newspapers, the government-enforced right to access referenced in footnote 10.

Therefore, any attempt to revive the Fairness Doctrine should exempt broadcasters from the costs of compliance and corresponding litigation, so that they can't be bullied into not covering the issue. Further, it should very clearly define the terms of non-compliance to minimize the risk of sanctions in the minds of broadcasters, and perhaps reward broadcasters for exceptional compliance. And a balance of views should be required within each program (or within the majority of programs), to minimize selective exposure effects.

Conclusion

Were the Fairness Doctrine to come back in the modified form as described above, it might seriously mitigate our culture of political polarization. It would still likely fall prey to disconfirmation bias, which causes even those receiving a balanced array of information to become more sure of their existing beliefs. But it would be a great start. However, it's not going to happen any time soon.

In the mean time, it is valuable to try to design products (namely software) that would help well-meaning news consumers navigate the media environment rationally. Building such software is incredibly hard because of the biases mentioned above.

However, there are some promising strategies for overcoming those cognitive traps. For example, a number of studies (Fischer, Schulz-Hardt & Frey, 2008; Sears, 1965) have found that simply priming norms of fairness (e.g. by reminding subjects of its importance or of the importance of researching matters skeptically) could eliminate or dramatically reduce the effects of selective exposure. Another strategy is to stress the long-term value of reaching the right conclusion; studies (Frey, 1986) have found that people will accept some

dissonance now if they suspect it will save them more dissonance down the line (e.g. because they won't be at risk of feeling dissonance from voting incorrectly).

A potentially-obvious, yet crucial, strategy is to get diverse opinions in front of readers immediately after a new story breaks. Whereas readers may have some ideological predispositions going in, many will be willing to consider the particulars of the issue before jumping to a stock ideological answer. And if all viewpoints are presented from the beginning, readers will have little of themselves invested in any one, thereby minimizing dissonance effects.

Another approach is to present users the raw data, with beautiful (automatically-generated) visualizations showing how well the competing arguments "fit it". Because data has the appearance of objectivity, and because they aren't being told what to think directly from an article, users who explore this data may feel like they're reaching a conclusion on their own, and might therefore buy into the conclusion more fully. The system should encourage this kind of data exploration.

In addition, the software should go beyond simply showing views from opposing parties and try to foster true debate (i.e. get ideas to "battle", rather than talk past, each other); it should try to find articles that directly respond to other articles and present the whole dialogue chain for the user to see.

Last but not least, a successful design would recognize that users treat the news largely as entertainment, so they can't simply be force-fed a constant stream of "serious" news that they don't want; some balance between meaningful discourse and casual entertainment must be found.

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