

## **Differential information deficits do not explain political polarization:**

### **A closer look at Partisan Selective Exposure Theory**

#### **1. Background**

Social epistemology: compensating for individual cognitive limitations by fostering bonds of epistemic trust (and affect) with social peers.

- Human beings cannot choose *whether* to trust but have some degree of discretion in terms of *who* to trust, and how far to trust them.
- Idealizing assumption: in the absence of stronger evidence to the contrary, we have a default entitlement to assume that our testifiers are both competent (i.e., have genuine information to share) and sincere (i.e., are willing to share that information).

By contrast, political epistemology involves the known risk of encountering strategic, deceptive communication.

- Politics incentivizes the use of misinformation as a tool for undermining others' political agency.
- The guiding question of my current work: how should rational epistemic agents respond to the recognition that they now find themselves in an *antagonistic information environment*?

#### **2. Introducing Partisan Selective Exposure Theory**

Political polarization: doxastic and affective components.

- Doxastic: increasing distance between people of different political orientations in terms of the beliefs they hold and the evidence they will accept for these beliefs.
- Affective: increasing sense of antipathy between people of different political orientations.

Proposed explanation: partisan selective exposure to news media.

- People of different political orientations ("partisans") increasingly get their news from different politically aligned news media.
- These different news media are highly biased in what stories they cover and how they spin them.
- As a result, there will be an emerging information gap between different groups of partisans.
  - Political polarization is explained as the predictable outcome of mutual information deficits.
- PEW Research Center Report 2014: "When it comes to getting news about politics and government, liberals and conservatives inhabit different worlds."

Three questions for "Partisan Selective Exposure Theory."

- Is it getting the empirical facts right?
  - Preview: hard to tell, but probably not.
- Is the underlying explanatory model any good?
  - Preview, no: it treats as a problem of information *access*, what should really be considered in terms of information *processing*.
- Are its normative implications at least potentially helpful?
  - Preview, no: in antagonistic information environments, they might in fact render us more vulnerable to manipulation and radicalization.

### 3. Empirical adequacy

The surprisingly long history of Partisan Selective Exposure Theory.

- Shifting targets? Print media, television, talk show radio .... the Internet.
- Or is the internet (and news personalization via social media) *finally* the target that Partisan Selective Exposure Theory has been looking for all along?
  - From active, individual choice to passive “algorithmic filtering”?

But is it *true* that most people increasingly get their news from different, politically aligned sources?

- A surprisingly difficult question to answer: different methodologies, with different limitations.
  - Surveys, experiments, tracking of online behaviors.

Even on its most favorable interpretation, the results are not particularly encouraging.

- There may be a small preference for “opinion-reinforcing” stories and for outlets that regularly publish such stories.
  - But the effect is marginal, and not on the scale that would help explain political polarization.
- But also, the “preference” for opinion-reinforcing news is not matched by any marked aversion to “opinion-challenging” news.
  - The evidence indicates that most routes lead to “a few popular, well-known political news sites,” comprising “ideologically diverse audiences [which] share audiences with nearly all smaller, more ideologically extreme outlets” (Nelson and Webster 2017)
  - “in America today, it is virtually impossible to live in an ideological bubble. Most Americans rely on an array of outlets ... for political news. And many consistent conservatives and liberals hear dissenting political views in their everyday lives” (PEW 2014).

### 4. Explanatory model

Partisan Selective Exposure Theory is presented as an empirical thesis. But its empirical grounding is uncertain. Nonetheless, perhaps we should still favor it, just because its underlying explanatory model is so powerful.

- The lack of empirical grounding simply reflects the difficulties of observing these things directly.
- Meanwhile, the Theory still offers an inference to the best explanation of political polarization today.

No. Its underlying explanatory model is based around assumptions of ignorance (“mutual information deficits”).

- The ignorance-assumption is not only empirically unvalidated but also inconsistent with a central feature of contemporary political partisanship.

To identify as a political partisan is, in part, to define oneself against “ideological others.”

- To do this effectively, one needs reasonably detailed knowledge of what these “others” think.
- One reliable way to acquire this knowledge is to monitor the news outlets that they are known to consult.

In other words, “selective preference” was never a good proxy for knowledge of opposing views and arguments.

- Political partisans still spend significant time monitoring “ideologically diverse” news outlets.
- Even if the empirical studies showed a clear, ideologically aligned preference, any model that was structured around the assumption of mutual ignorance would simply lack explanatory traction.

Partisan Selective Exposure Theory mistakenly treats as a problem of *information access* what is really a problem of *information processing*.

- What needs to be explained is not how political partisans successfully maintain their ignorance of opposing viewpoints and arguments in today's information-saturated environment.
- Rather, what needs to be explained is how, *despite* their having generally accurate knowledgeable about such facts, they nonetheless process this information in ways that maintain their political partisanship.

## 5. Normative implications

If Partisan Selective Exposure Theory were on the right track, then its normative implications would be clear.

- To overcome the mutual information deficit, we are all under an epistemic (moral? political? etc.) obligation to “diversify our sources” (Worsnip 2019).

But if the Theory is empirically ungrounded and its explanatory model misguided, this normative implication would seem inert.

- We already seem to have plenty knowledge of the arguments and positions on “the other side.”
- The problem is not in what we information we have but in how we process this information.

This suggests a more relevant construal of the normative implication.

- To overcome political polarization, we must not only “expose ourselves” to contrary opinions and arguments but also be prepared to “keep an open mind.”

This *seems* like it is rooted in generally sound epistemic advice.

- “Closemindedness” is an epistemic vice, plausibly implicated in contemporary adherence to conspiracy theories, science-denial, and other pathways toward political radicalization (Cassam 2016).
- We really *should* strive to be more open-minded, in recognition of our cognitive finitude and fallibility.

Counterpoint: “openmindedness” may be virtuous in contexts where we start out with zero information.

- But this is not our typical starting point in political discourse.
- In political discourse, a requirement of openmindedness will often be inconsistent with the overriding epistemic norm of judging on the basis of one's *total evidence*.
  - Probabilistic interconnections between one's beliefs and the evidence that justifies the beliefs: “keeping an open mind” requires suspending judgment not just in an isolated proposition but also in the evidence that supports it, and reducing trust in the sources that supply this evidence.

Claim: political discourse is generally understood to be, at least in part, an *antagonistic information environment*.

- In antagonistic information environments, the normative injunction to keep an open mind can serve as a tool for epistemic manipulation.

Case study: “processual redpilling” as a recruitment tool on QAnon discussion boards (Marwick and Furl 2024)

- Context: novices ask for advice. I want to believe, but I'm finding it hard to take in. How do I proceed?
- Answer: it *is* hard. Conviction can only come gradually. For now, just try to “keep an open mind.”
  - *Telling* you what to believe is what woke leftists do.
  - By contrast, we're an open-minded community of truth-seekers, willing to look beyond “the conventional narrative” and the evidence that supports it.

- But your new peers fully trust that, as you accept the smaller “redpills,” you will also gradually lose your confidence in the authorities that supply the evidence for the conventional narrative.
  - Even as you are never asked to *believe* in any particular proposition, that loss will prepare you for steadily larger redpills down the road.
- What greases this path toward radicalization is normative injunction to “keep an open mind.”

### Conclusion:

Partisan Selective Exposure Theory is empirically false, non-explanatory, *and* normatively misguided.

- In antagonistic information environments, such as we should expect to find in political debates, attempting to abide by its normative implications would render us vulnerable to epistemic manipulation.

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