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Now Can We Stop Saying It's Social Media That's Polarizing America?

DAVID MOSCHELLA I SEPTEMBER 2022

Defending Digital Series, No. 9: The events at Mar-a-Lago and President Biden's September 1 address to the nation demonstrate what has been clear all along. Compared to the many issues that divide Americans today, social media is a very minor factor. Policymakers should focus less on extremist language and more on clarifying what behavior is legal and what is not.

A few weeks ago, someone asked me: "Of all the complaints about Big Tech today, which is the most exaggerated?"

Ironically, the accusation that seems most dubious is the one we hear most often: that social media and the Internet are polarizing America. As recent events have again confirmed, this is like saying that littered plastic straws and used covid masks are ruining the oceans. Sure, they add to pollution and make for a depressing sight, but compared to the billions of plastic bottles, bags, product packages, and other trash, they are literally a drop in the ocean.

SOURCES OF POLARIZATION

No one disputes the fact that polarization is now deeply embedded in American society, affecting all of us in one way or another. But although it may be comforting to blame "toxic social media," the problem runs much deeper than that. Consider the 10 dynamics below, every one of which is more divisive than anything stemming from the digital world.

1. **All things Trump.** President Trump remains a uniquely polarizing figure, revered and reviled in roughly equal measure. His supporters are enraged by seven years of accusations and investigations, two impeachment trials, and the FBI's "raid" on Mar-a-Lago. Opponents are appalled by Trump's language and behavior, his claims of a stolen election and the "insurrection" of January 6. Depending upon the evidence, any future indictments of the former president could take these divisions to a whole other level.
2. **Policy disagreements.** The public has strong but sharply different views on many important issues—abortion, gun control, school curricula, border security, the use of fossil fuels, police funding, drug legalization, vaccine mandates, transgender sports, voter IDs, mail-in ballots, and now whether the FBI's search was justified or not. Differences in these areas

have deeply—and sometimes permanently—divided friends, families, communities, schools, workplaces, states, and the nation as a whole.

3. **Institutional distrust.** Public confidence in the Congress, the courts, the police, the media, and now the FBI, as well as in schools, experts, religious organizations, and election results has declined significantly. This lack of societal trust makes it much more likely that institutional decisions and actions will be resented and/or resisted by one side or the other. Few ideas are more corrosive than the belief—now widely held by both the left and the right—that there are two standards of American justice.

4. **Tribal politics.** Two-party systems can easily result in a Manichean mindset—*us vs. them; we're good, they're evil; if they win, we lose*—especially when there are little to no unifying issues (such as there were with foreign policy during much of the Cold War). In a 50/50 environment where every vote can be critical, tribal loyalties and tribal rhetoric dominate.

5. **Media incitement.** CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and others have put polarization at the heart of their business model. They deliberately select and spin stories that stir up their audiences. Radio—and now podcasts—are also highly polarized. Americans can listen to the soft-spoken liberalism of NPR or the shock-jock descendants of Rush Limbaugh, but there isn't much talk radio in between. Similarly, the most popular podcast in the United States—The Joe Rogan Experience—is probably also the most unpopular. America's major news organizations, including the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, have also become more partisan and strident in recent years.

6. **State vs. national "majorities."** In terms of the number of states and overall landmass, America is a conservative nation, but in terms of population it's more liberal. Actions that reflect the will of the majority at a state level often conflict with those of the national majority. Since the boundaries between state and federal power are murky in many areas, jurisdictional tensions are inevitable. Talk of civil war and fascism is now commonplace.

7. **Covid schisms.** During the pandemic, richer Americans stayed at home and got richer, while the less-well-off did most of the dangerous and necessary work. School closures, business lockdowns, mask mandates, travel restrictions, the firing of non-vaccinated workers, and repeated assertions of (evolving) "official truths" vs. "dangerous misinformation" have further raised concerns about both societal fairness and unchecked government power.

8. **Woke academia.** Once a respected source of expertise and perspective, America's universities are increasingly seen as far left and out of touch. The recent emphasis on diversity training, intersectionality, "offensive" speech, trigger warnings, safe spaces, microaggressions, white privilege, gender fluidity, pronoun policies, toxic masculinity, defining who is a woman, and transgender athlete and bathroom rights are far removed from the day-to-day concerns of most citizens, many of whom fear that these issues are trickling down into K-12 education, as we saw in the 2021 Virginia governor's race.

9. **Race and identity.** Many Americans saw the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 as entirely understandable and justified; many others saw criminal violence and the suspension of the rule of law. Emotions ran high on both sides, and still do. Attacks

against Asian-Americans, large-scale immigration across the southern U.S. border, and increased discussion of white supremacy, white privilege, and identity politics have also contributed to heightened racial divisions.

10. **Shifting intolerances.** As social tolerance has gone up—for marijuana, gay marriage, LGBTQ lifestyles, and religious beliefs—political and free speech tolerance has gone down. Where once parents worried that their children might be gay or marry someone from another faith or race, now they worry their sons and daughters might love a Republican or Democrat.

In short, if every form of social media and every online forum were switched off today, America would still be a highly polarized nation, just as it was during the 1960s when war, riots, protests, racial tensions, assassinations, bombings, drugs, and huge political, cultural, and generational shifts created similar societal divisions, all without any help from digital technology. Happily, that era also resulted in the civil rights, women's, environmental and other movements, as well as some of the finest music the world has ever produced. We should be so lucky this time.

Over the last few years, Donald Trump, Dr. Robert Malone, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Steve Bannon, Alex Berenson, James O'Keefe, Lin Wood, Michael Flynn, Sydney Powell, Roger Stone, Aubrey Huff, Mike Lindell, Milo Yiannopoulos, Alex Jones, David Duke, and others have been banned or suspended by Twitter, which expects to take similar actions in advance of the upcoming midterms. But whether you agree with all, some, or none of Twitter's decisions, does anyone believe that social media silencing has made for a less divided America? When it comes to polarization, Facebook and Twitter just aren't that important. The Mar-a-Lago maelstrom should make this clear to everyone once and for all.

SOCIAL MEDIA SCAPEGOATING

Given that there are obviously much more potent sources of polarization, why have social media, online forums and the Internet received so much of the blame? There at least five reasons, only one of which is compelling:

1. **Social media and polarization grew up together.** Facebook was founded in 2004, and Twitter in 2006 but their rise to prominence came during the 2010s. Polarization also increased sharply during this period. But correlation is not causation.

2. **It's easier than looking in the mirror.** It's hardly surprising that politicians, traditional media, universities, and other major institutions would rather blame new technologies that stir up the unwashed masses than take a close look at their own role. "If only the citizenry would rely more on mainstream media, all would be well."

3. **It simplifies the problem.** It's much more comforting to believe that all we have to do is curb the excesses of social media than admit that the problem is much deeper and more fundamental than that. "We just need to reform Section 230."

4. **There are easy to point to excesses.** Social media doesn't cause polarization but it does showcase it. People say nastier things when they can do so anonymously, as they can on Twitter. Facebook's own employees have complained about the way the company's algorithms are polarizing.[1] But these two issues are manageable. Only 20 percent of

Americans use Twitter at all, and only about 10 percent regularly. Facebook's algorithms are a small issue in the scheme of things, and the fact that this topic has received such extraordinary media coverage is telling. (While there are concerns about misinformation on TikTok, the company hasn't yet been a major part of the polarization blame game.)[2]

5. **The online world can be linked to high-profile criminal acts.** Unfortunately, digital technologies have played a role in recent mass shootings, political riots, threats and attacks against public officials, and other troubling events. As discussed below, this is the area that public policy should focus on.

THE "EXTREMISM" FUDGE

Almost by definition, rising polarization tends to increase extremism and radicalization. But the use of those latter two words as pejoratives has pushed policymakers in the wrong direction. Americans are entitled to hold controversial views. We are free to proclaim that the killing of animals for food is murder, that corporations should be nationalized, that the FBI has been politicized, that visitors from outer space are among us, and much more offensive beliefs from the left, right, or elsewhere. While one could argue that policymakers should try to distinguish between safe and dangerous extremism, in practice this rarely occurs. "Extremism" almost always comes with a negative connotation, despite what Barry Goldwater famously proclaimed.[3]

This is unfortunate because the real problem isn't extremism or radicalization; it's crime. In recent years, politicians and the media have shied away from using the word *crime* in this context because it raises questions that are hard to answer definitively. As shown below, many of these questions are particularly relevant to social media and other online forums.

1. To what extent can protestors disrupt business or government activity on or offline?
2. When does a fiery speech become illegal incitement?
3. Is it ever okay to tear down a statue or destroy/disable public or private property?
4. At what point do online hatred and veiled threats become criminal?
5. Is it legal to block a highway or publish videos of visitors to an abortion clinic?
6. Is it okay to post the residential addresses of government officials, or harass them in public or at home?
7. What limits should be placed on the purveyors of online violence?
8. How do we determine if an angry activist group is actually engaged in a criminal conspiracy?
9. Under what circumstances, if any, can law enforcement use profiling to predict who might become a mass shooter, a terrorist, or similar public risk?

By using the word extremism instead of the word crime, we essentially fudge these issues, conflating the legal right to express controversial views with the illegal acts they may or may not lead to. This now widespread practice has only added to polarization, as it can demonize those with strongly held views regardless of whether there is any criminal intent or action.

To avoid this conflation, policymakers should talk much less about extremism and much more about what is legal and what is not at the federal, state, and local levels. If people know the laws and rules, they are less likely to break them, especially if those rules are enforced consistently and even-handedly. While there have been many debates about the nine questions above, they have not provided the public with a clear set of guidelines. But this is what is needed to help social media firms, law enforcement, and the citizenry alike. Legal clarity and consistency won't end the worrisome divisions within America today, but they might reduce polarization's more dangerous effects until the national mood calms down, whenever that might be.

About This Series

ITIF's "Defending Digital" series examines popular criticisms, complaints, and policy indictments against the tech industry to assess their validity, correct factual errors, and debunk outright myths. Our goal in this series is not to defend tech reflexively or categorically, but to scrutinize widely echoed claims that are driving the most consequential debates in tech policy. Before enacting new laws and regulations, it's important to ask: Do these claims hold water?

About the Author

David Moschella is a non-resident senior fellow at ITIF. Previously, he was head of research at the Leading Edge Forum, where he explored the global impact of digital technologies, with a particular focus on disruptive business models, industry restructuring and machine intelligence. Before that, David was the worldwide research director for IDC, the largest market analysis firm in the information technology industry. His books include *Seeing Digital—A Visual Guide to the Industries, Organizations, and Careers of the 2020s* (DXC, 2018), *Customer-Driven IT* (Harvard Business School Press, 2003), and *Waves of Power* (Amacom, 1997).

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ENDNOTES

1. Meltem Odabas, "10 facts about Americans and Twitter," Pew Research Center, May 5, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/05/05/10-facts-about-americans-and-twitter/.
2. Tiffany Hsu, "On TikTok, Election Misinformation Thrives Ahead of Midterms," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2022 https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/14/business/media/on-tiktok-election-misinformation.html.
3. Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) accepted the Republican Party's nomination for president of the United States on July 16, 1964. In his acceptance speech, Goldwater said, "I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!" See: https://www.c-span.org/video/?320250-1/reel-america-barry-goldwaters-1964-acceptance-speech.