

Memo: Two takes from the academy on whether the American media is responsible for the affective polarization of US politics

Introduction

Two terms will come up extensively in this memo that need to be defined first:

1. American media (hereafter “the media”): US-based news outlets—whether partisan or nonpartisan, but not social media (bloggers, etc.);
2. Affective polarization (hereafter “polarization”): the tendency of partisans/partisan-leaning people to mutually distrust and dislike the other party—not just their ideas.

For a long time, academic discussion about media and polarization have focused on elite polarization (ideological polarization of Congress and party activists). However, starting in 2012 with a landmark article by Ivengar et. al., affective polarization became the prevailing lens to judge the media’s role in polarization by. Most scholars like Dvir Gvirsman (2014) and Feldman et. al. (2014) have since used this framework to show affective polarization preceding ideological polarization and as something caused by partisan media. However, the academy has remained divided on whether affective polarization is the result of media *at large*. Critics of media causing affective polarization such as Prior (2013) attribute it to more partisan outlets rather than the mainstream (New York Times, Washington Post, WSJ, etc.). Here are the supporters (and critics) outlined:

Yes, the media have caused polarization: the media selectively cover more radical and partisan views, distorting political reality.

Theory: The private media, being for-profit firms, look for more sensational pieces and conflict to cover in competition for consumers with each other. Therefore, they selectively cover the extremes of American politics, making political reality *appear* more extreme than it really is and polarizing Americans (a self-fulfilling prophecy).

Evidence: Wagner and Gruszczynski (2017), using data from 1993 to 2013, modeled the relationship between ideological extremity (on a scale of 0 to 1.0) among individual congressmen and the amount of coverage they individually received (in number of news articles). Their model predicted that for an individual congressman in the 103rd Congress (1993-1995), the most ideologically extreme (1.0) would receive 10 more news articles covering them than the ideologically moderate (0). However, this relationship since the 103rd Congress has been growing stronger since: for the 112th Congress (2011-2013), the model showed that the ideologically extreme congressman could expect double that amount of coverage (20 articles) over his ideologically moderate counterpart. The change in coverage over time suggests that

congressmen, to obtain more coverage and recognition, are becoming more ideologically extreme.

See also: McCluskey and Kim (2012), who find that moderate advocacy groups receive less media coverage than their more extreme counterparts; Larcinese et. al. (2011), who find for Republican presidents, pro-Democratic outlets consistently cover high unemployment and vice-versa for other economic issues.

No, they haven't: most media tend to be nonpartisan for economic reasons.

Theory: It doesn't do good for a for-profit business, media or otherwise, to antagonize some of its potential consumers. Therefore, mainstream media tends to be centrist to appeal to the most consumers possible and maximize their profit. Any increasing polarization exhibited in the media is thus mostly reflective of existing polarization in American politics.

Evidence: Prior (2013) finds that even partisan outlets receive significant viewership from their ideological opponents: 22 percent of the Huffington Post website traffic was conservative, while for more mainstream outlets such as the New York Times, website traffic was 30 percent conservative and traffic thus more moderate overall. However, Prior found that at the same time, mainstream media was far more centrist than members of the US Senate. In 1999, only 3 out of 100 senators fell within the middle third of ideological extremity, while 18 out of 20 outlets ranked the same way did. 18 out of 20 outlets also had ideological positions between Senators Joe Liebermann and Susan Collins, who are among the most moderate members of the Senate.

See also: Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) who find media firms' ideological slant to be most strongly a response to consumer preferences, reflecting existing polarization.

Conclusion

We cannot conclude that in an era which has been labelled with terms such as "fake news" and "alternative facts," where partisan media such as Fox News and MSNBC are wildly successful, that the media have little to no causal effect on polarization. However, the evidence is also lacking for ascribing to the media all the cause (or blame), as Van Aelst et. al. (2017) argue.

Rather, as an experimental study from Druckman et. al. (2018) suggests, the media have a multiplicative role to play: the media's role in highlighting and intensifying existing polarization has been previously undermeasured, especially when we fail to consider factors such as word-of-mouth from news reporting.

Nonetheless, there is still a solution to mitigating media's multiplicative effect on polarization. In an era of political selective exposure (PSE), in which people filter their news to news that appeals to their existing political beliefs (Bos et. al. 2016), it is important to find and support media that cross-cuts across political cleavages and bypasses such filters. Results from Warner (2017) support the assertion that cross-cutting media depolarizes its consumers. Bos et. al. (2016) found that public news

broadcasting in the Netherlands was the only type of news outlet to cross-cut across all cleavages. Public news broadcasting also avoids many of the for-profit behavior that incentivizes private media to multiply existing polarization. Encouraging the expansion of public news broadcasting may help alleviate the media's ill effects on the growing polarization in American politics.

References

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Warner's article is an excellent resource for studying the role the media has to play in intensifying American polarization. Using a study of 992 US residents, Warner found that media which emphasizes a single ideological perspective has significant polarizing effects which increased the level of affective polarization among the study's participants. Meanwhile, nonpartisan media that cut across political cleavages had a significant depolarizing effect on the participants' affective polarization. These findings show that the rise of partisan media has been the primary contributing factor of the media to polarization.