

Can Social Media and Media Literacy Reduce Affective Polarization?

Sarah Markowitz

Brooklyn Technical High School, 29 Fort Greene Pl, Brooklyn, NY, 11217, United States

ABSTRACT

Affective polarization—when individuals have positive feelings about members of their party and negative, harsh views about members of the opposing party—has become an ever-growing concern. In recent years, especially with the rise of social media, many have begun to take notice of affective polarization. The literature has shown that social media has the effect of creating echo chambers in which individuals are only exposed to content promoting their own views and biases. While scholars have explored the potential for media literacy programs to decrease affective polarization, we don't yet know whether media literacy programs can reduce the spread of affective polarization on social media. This paper explores whether media literacy programs could decrease affective polarization on social media and draws the conclusion that implementing a program like this is not only difficult but will likely have adverse effects such as fostering cynicism. These findings suggest that addressing the nation's polarization will require legal regulations.

Keywords: Affective polarization, Social media, Media literacy, Partisan Politics, Echo Chambers

INTRODUCTION

Affective polarization has become an ever-growing concern, particularly in the U.S. (1). Affective polarization is a type of political polarization in which individuals have positive feelings about members of their own party but negative, harsh views about members of the opposing party (2). In recent years, with the rise of social media, affective polarization has become much more noticeable, with people dividing

themselves up into ingroups—groups one identifies with—and outgroups. When one goes on social media, they are given posts that match what they like to watch and the users' perspectives, in the hopes that they will stay on the app or website for longer. This creates echo chambers, where individuals are only exposed to content promoting their own views and biases, increasing their affective polarization. Outside of social media, there have been efforts to combat affective polarization through media literacy campaigns and education, as well as experimental platforms such as the chat platform created by Combs *et al.* This platform, called DiscussIt, lets users have anonymous conversations with people whose political views differ from their own. They determined the site was successful in depolarizing users (3). However, none of them have been nationally successful. This paper explores whether

Corresponding author: Sarah Markowitz, E-mail: sarahmarkowitz4@gmail.com.

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media literacy programs could decrease affective polarization on social media. This does not necessarily mean that the media literacy efforts must be on social media, but rather could attempt to target people at a national level, such as children.

This paper proceeds as follows: first, an overview of affective polarization and why it is problematic for the U.S. today is provided. Then, the relationship between social media and affective polarization is explained. Then media literacy is defined and programs that have been developed to promote media literacy are evaluated. Finally, whether and how media literacy programs could decrease affective polarization on social media is evaluated. It is concluded that media literacy efforts aimed at reducing this may likely backfire as they will only foster cynicism in people, further reaffirming their preexisting biases.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Affective polarization is the tendency of ordinary people to dislike and distrust members of the opposing political party (4). Affective polarization is distinct from other forms of political polarization as it includes animosity toward members of the opposing party. This is distinct from ideological polarization, which is disagreement and differentiation in ideological views and political matters (4).

Affective polarization, which is on the rise, poses a much more dangerous threat. Ideological polarization can be healthy at times, as this disagreement leads to

debates and promotes innovation and new ideas, which is important for a democracy to thrive (Table 1). Affective polarization, however, has the opposite effect. It creates divides between parties and politicians and makes it difficult to come to a compromise, with each party viewing the other as a threat. Affective polarization fosters a deep hatred toward members of the opposing party and is a serious threat to political stability because it leads both sides to perceive elections as threats to their ways of life and to democracy itself (5). With politicians viewing members of the opposing party as morally inferior or threatening, they become less willing to engage in bipartisan cooperation (4). Affective polarization also makes it difficult for politicians to even respect members of the opposing party, with politicians today calling each other cruel names and hurling unnecessary insults at one another.

Over the past four decades, polarization has been on the rise in America. Along with this, affective polarization has risen dramatically, despite the fact that the two major political parties, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, are less popular than ever (6). Cold feelings toward the opposite party have increased: in the span of three years from 2016 to 2019, political animosity between members of opposing parties continued to increase. In three years, the percentage of Democrats who viewed Republicans negatively increased from 61 to 79. A similar trend was true for Republicans, with the percentage of Republicans who had “cold” feelings toward Democrats increasing from 69 to 83 during this same period (6). Yet, many

Table 1. Differences Between Ideological and Affective Polarization

Type of Polarization	Definition	Example
Affective Polarization	A type of polarization where individuals have positive feelings about members of their party and negative, harsh views about members of the opposing party (1).	In 1958, 72% of Americans said it didn’t matter to them if their children married a Democrat or Republican. In 2016, however, only 45% of respondents said that it did not matter. This shows a huge increase in affective polarization as it shows an increase in cross party animosity and dislike of members of an out-group (24).
Ideological Polarization	Disagreement and differentiation in ideological views and political matters (4).	In 1975, 19% of Democrats supported abortion being legal in all circumstances while only 18% of Republicans did. In 2025, however, 56% of Democrats and only 10% of Republicans supported abortions being legal under any circumstances. This shows an increasing divide in views between the parties, but does not show an increase in cross party animosity regarding the issue. It only shows an increase in the ideological divide on this issue (25).

Americans still feel an attachment to one of the parties and often vote accordingly. Split voting, where voters vote for presidential and congressional candidates of different parties, has decreased from roughly 25% of voters to 10% in the past 40 years, reflecting a troubling trend of an increase in affective polarization (7). This polarization can lead to many problems in the U.S. The biggest problem is an unwillingness to compromise among politicians as well as a lack of trust in American institutions and government (8). This has disastrous effects, not just the way that Americans see other Americans, but the way they view their own higher institutions. It leaves people to be less trusting, and it makes it harder to pass legislation, but also to compromise generally (9).

Affective polarization has significantly reshaped American voting behavior. Approximately one-third of American voters in 2020 cast their votes more “against” a candidate than “for” one. This phenomenon, known as negative voting, is driven by intense animosity toward the opposing party rather than genuine support for one’s own party (10). Now more than ever, Americans are voting along party lines. Research indicates that voters with stronger negative feelings toward the other party are more likely to vote strictly along party lines, not out of allegiance, but to prevent the opposing party from gaining power. This is a problem because it shows the prevailing influence of affective polarization on voting patterns. This means people are voting more and more to prevent a group they don’t like from being in power, rather than voting for someone of their own beliefs. This is a dangerous trend as it only exacerbates the divide between political parties and can lead to more political campaigns where politicians attack their opponents instead of debating policy.

SOCIAL MEDIA & AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Social media algorithms reinforce and amplify partisan and social biases through their design. When social media algorithms prioritize engagement, they show users content that aligns with their implicit preferences and automatic behaviors. These are preferences that can include unconscious biases and partisan animosity. As highlighted by two different Facebook features—Facebook’s News Feed, which shows users posts more curated to their preferences and past activity, and its “People You May Know” feature, which shows users people of their in-group who they

likely know—algorithms tend to show users fewer posts from out-group members, including those of different political, racial, or religious backgrounds (11).

This lack of exposure to diverse perspectives can deepen in-group favoritism and out-group hostility, core components of affective polarization (11). By continually reinforcing users’ preexisting views and social identities, social media algorithms create echo chambers that normalize extreme opinions and vilify opposing groups. In a political context, this means users are more likely to encounter emotionally charged and polarizing content about the opposing party, which increases the likelihood of negative voting. This aligns with findings that affective polarization leads to more rigid, party-line voting, as individuals are less open to alternative views and are more driven by emotional opposition. Thus, social media algorithms fuel affective polarization, contributing to a political environment where compromise becomes less likely and partisan divisions grow increasingly entrenched.

One-way social media contributes to affective polarization is by spreading fake news. Discerning what is fake news on social media is difficult due to the rapid dissemination of misinformation via user-generated content on social media since anyone can make content. Additionally, existing detection techniques which hinge on detecting linguistic or structural anomalies in writing, often struggle with the rapid dissemination of fake news and advancement of AI, especially on social media (12). The rapid, widespread dissemination of misinformation on social media makes discerning fake news difficult, as was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, a substantial portion of the population accepted conspiracy theories as true, with many claiming the virus was a hoax (13). This widespread acceptance of conspiracy theories and fake news underscores the difficulty in distinguishing between real news and fake news, especially when misinformation aligns with existing beliefs or fears. Furthermore, even when accurate, evidence-based information is presented to counteract false narratives, it often fails to change individuals’ beliefs. This resistance to correction is worsened by social media’s design, which can create echo chambers that reinforce existing viewpoints (13).

MEDIA LITERACY

The growing prominence of fake news on social media and social media’s expanding role in the media

landscape highlight the importance of efforts to increase media literacy. Such efforts aim to mitigate the adverse effects of misinformation and restore public trust in reliable news sources. Media literacy is most commonly described as a skill set that promotes critical engagement with messages produced by the media. Definitions of media literacy can fall into one of six themes: access, analysis, evaluation, creation, reflection, and action (14). The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) defines media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication. “As can be seen from these definitions, part of media literacy is empowering individuals to be critical thinkers. Media literacy enables people to navigate the complex media landscape, make informed decisions, and engage meaningfully in democratic processes (15).

Now more than ever, people are having a harder time with media literacy and discerning between real and fake news. Researchers have pointed out that the contemporary media landscape, characterized by the rapid dissemination of information, has complicated the public’s ability to critically evaluate news content (16). The term “fake news” has been used by politicians to discredit legitimate journalism and erode trust in traditional news sources. President Donald Trump has used “fake news” to refer to CNN, The New York Times, and The Washington Post, among others. This politicization of the term contributes to a climate of skepticism, making it harder for individuals to distinguish between credible information and misinformation.

As explained above, social media platforms, driven by algorithms that prioritize engagement, often push radical and emotionally charged content, regardless of its accuracy. This creates echo chambers where individuals are exposed predominantly to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, reducing exposure to diverse perspectives. These echo chambers created by social media undermine the development of media literacy skills, as individuals are less encouraged to question and analyze the information they consume. On social media, content is curated for users by the algorithm, which often pushes content that appeals to the users’ preexisting biases, reinforcing the users’ beliefs without exposing them to an opposing view. This constant cycle of content and reinforcement of their preexisting views makes it even more challenging at times to discern between fake news and real news (16).

Today, many people are becoming better at detecting false news and information. Media literacy efforts are becoming increasingly important as news shifts away from the traditional and toward creators on social media, who are often unreliable. In an experiment conducted by Altay, De Angelis, and Hoes, participants were exposed to varying proportions of false media to assess how tips for spotting fake news had improved participants’ ability to differentiate between fake news and the truth. Skepticism-enhancing tips were able to effectively reduce the acceptance and sharing of fake news. However, tips meant to induce trust in more traditional news sources led to mixed results. Trust-enhancing tips led to increased trust in more traditional media sources. This shows that media literacy efforts should not focus solely on fostering skepticism but should also promote trust in credible sources. Balancing teaching skepticism with teaching trust seems to be the most effective strategy in improving an individual’s media literacy (17).

However, traditional media sources may be under threat today as social media becomes a more and more prevalent way for people to get their news and information. With millions of users today, social media has significantly changed the way people consume their news. It has decreased the role of more traditional, often more accurate media outlets and has led to a rise in misinformation (13). Platforms like Facebook and Instagram have become primary sources for many, especially for younger people. This has led to a media landscape in which far more fake news is prevalent than ever before.

Fake news being disseminated through social media has had a profound impact on people’s trust in information sources. Research has indicated that the spread of fake news and misleading content has eroded public trust in traditional news outlets but also contributed to the polarization of societal beliefs. The widespread nature of fake news on social media platforms has made it more and more difficult for the public to be able to distinguish false information from the truth (13).

Eyal *et al.* analyzed several efforts by schools aimed at improving media literacy in children over an 11-year period. These included an online journalism literacy workshop which led to decrease in news bias susceptibility, a media education semester-long course analyzing bias in video news leading to an increased awareness and knowledge of journalism and bias, and a course on Podcast journalism which led to enhanced

analytic skills (Table 2).

The most common outcome was a critical approach toward the media: learning to be skeptical of news, vet sources, and be on the lookout for fake news. Another finding was increased understanding of media content, heightened awareness of media influence, and a more critical approach to media consumption. This led to enhanced feelings of competency and empowerment regarding media use, improved digital media content production skills, and a reduction in excessive or risky media use (18).

Key factors that contributed to the effectiveness of these media literacy efforts and interventions were also identified. It was noted that programs targeting younger audiences, incorporating practical components, and extending over longer durations or multiple sessions were associated with more consistent positive outcomes. However, the researchers acknowledged challenges in achieving successful outcomes, particularly given that media technologies are deeply integrated into children's daily lives. This integration can make it more difficult to encourage critical engagement with media content. However, Eyal *et al.* underscored the importance of well-designed, age-appropriate, and practical media literacy interventions in schools to equip students with the necessary skills to navigate the digital media landscape effectively.

Applying these strategies to social media platforms could be beneficial. For example, integrating practical

components such as workshops where students could analyze social media posts for biases or misinformation could enhance their critical thinking skills and help to improve their media literacy early on. Targeting younger audiences is also crucial, as early intervention can establish foundational skills for discerning between credible and fake news online. Moreover, implementing these programs over extended periods or through multiple sessions allows for the development of media literacy, leading to more sustained behavioral changes.

However, the effective application of in-school media literacy efforts is made difficult because of the dynamic nature of social media. Media literacy instruction in U.S. public schools is unevenly implemented, with significant disparities across schools of different ethnic and poverty levels. Some of the biggest obstacles to media literacy efforts are a lack of time, competing curricular priorities, and insufficient resources. Together, these have led to a lack of consistent media literacy education for children (19).

The constantly evolving algorithms and the vast amount of user-generated content require media literacy programs to be flexible and up-to-date. Educators must continuously revise curricula to address new trends and platforms, which is simply not feasible or realistic. Fostering collaborations between educators, policymakers, and social media companies could facilitate the development of effective media literacy initiatives tailored to the social media landscape.

Table 2. Summary of Media Literacy Interventions and Their Reported Outcomes

Intervention	Intervention Description	Outcome
Altay <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Individuals given tips to evaluate news sources more critically	Hindered sharing and acceptance of false news
Altay <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Individuals given tips on which types of news sources to trust as reliable	Boosted sharing and acceptance of true news
Babad <i>et al.</i> (2012) *	A media education semester-long course analyzing bias in video news where students were shown clips with nonverbal hostile behavior to see how it affects news bias	Significant decrease in news bias susceptibility
Gozansky (2021) *	Online journalism literacy workshop where students worked to create their own newspapers	Increased knowledge/awareness of journalism; Greater self-esteem; Successful creation/sharing of news stories
Schmier (2014) *	Podcast journalism 18 month investigation where popular culture and online networking practices of teens were incorporated into classroom literacy instruction	Enhanced analytic skills as applied to podcast journalism

*Intervention descriptions and outcomes taken from Eyal *et al.* (2023).

However, social media companies have no incentive to participate in this because the more people they can get hooked on their content and algorithm, the more profit they can generate.

While media literacy initiatives are vital for fostering critical thinking, such efforts alone may not effectively reduce affective polarization on social media platforms. One significant concern is that media literacy can inadvertently foster cynicism rather than healthy skepticism. Emphasizing media criticism without providing tools for evaluating credibility can lead individuals to distrust all information sources, not just unreliable ones. This erosion of trust can deepen partisan divides, as individuals may become more entrenched in their existing beliefs, viewing opposing perspectives with increased suspicion (20).

CONCLUSION

Whether media literacy programs can be used to decrease affective polarization on social media is a complicated question. Ultimately, however, because of the echo chambers created by social media, and social media's prolific, ever-changing nature, media literacy efforts would likely be ineffective at decreasing affective polarization. Teaching people skills that will erode their trust in social media and news sources will only strengthen their preexisting biases; it will not help them to become less effectively polarized. In the future, new social media regulations may reduce social media's ability to polarize. However, social media companies have no incentive to change their ways, and no truly effective laws have been passed to regulate them.

Currently, in the U.S., the *Communications Decency Act of 1996* (CDA) provides legal immunity to internet platforms for content created by their users. This means that websites, social media platforms, and forums generally cannot be held liable for what users post because they are not treated as the creators of that content. CDA section 230 protects platforms that choose to moderate or remove content for "good Samaritan blocking," which can be done selectively. Section 230 also lays out the policy of the United States to "preserve the vibrant and competitive free market," which the law says should remain "unfettered by Federal or State regulation" (21). This law was initially made to promote the growth of the internet but has since become controversial due to its impact on misinformation, hate speech, and platform accountability. However, it is still in place in the U.S. today.

Creating laws to regulate social media and its content is difficult because it presents a challenge to the First Amendment. Creating a law requiring social media content to be non-polar, or accurate, or inoffensive is difficult because it can be seen as subjective. Additionally, creating a law to regulate content and users' algorithms can be seen as editorial judgment. Editorial judgment is the decision-making power of editors, which can often be biased. Courts have historically ruled against decisions based on editorial judgment as they present a violation of the First Amendment (22).

Overall, social media is hard to regulate because of the legal challenges that come with it. Currently, there are age restriction regulations and regulations surrounding explicit content. Neither are well enforced, if at all (23). In the future, perhaps there will be a way to regulate it fairly and constitutionally, but currently it would seem extremely difficult, as it would likely have to be case by case.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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