



# CS 6474/CS 4803 Social Computing: Polarization and Selective Exposure

*Munmun De Choudhury*

[munmund@gatech.edu](mailto:munmund@gatech.edu)

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Perhaps one of the biggest strengths of social computing systems is that they allow people to find like minded others and form communities. This seems to be at odds with the dangers of polarization.

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# Dynamic Debates: An Analysis of Group Polarization Over Time on Twitter

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Sarita Yardi<sup>1</sup> and Danah Boyd<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The principle of homophily says that people associate with other groups of people who are mostly like themselves. Many online communities are structured around groups of socially similar individuals. On Twitter, however, people are exposed to multiple, diverse points of view through the public timeline. The authors captured 30,000 tweets about the shooting of George Tiller, a late-term abortion doctor, and the subsequent conversations among pro-life and pro-choice advocates. They found that replies between like-minded individuals strengthen group identity, whereas replies between different-minded individuals reinforce in-group and out-group affiliation. Their results show that people are exposed to broader viewpoints than they were before but are limited in their ability to engage in meaningful discussion. They conclude with implications for different kinds of social participation on Twitter more generally.

# Measuring Polarization

## A Measure of Polarization on Social Media Networks Based on Community Boundaries

**Pedro H. Calais Guerra, Wagner Meira Jr.**

Department of Computer Science  
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG)  
Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil

**Claire Cardie, Robert Kleinberg**

Dept. of Computer Science  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, NY 14853 USA

### Abstract

Polarization in social media networks is a fact in several scenarios such as political debates and other contexts such as same-sex marriage, abortion and gun control. Understanding and quantifying polarization is a long-term challenge to researchers from several areas, also being a key information for tasks such as opinion analysis. In this paper, we perform a systematic comparison between social networks that arise from both polarized and non-polarized contexts. This comparison shows that the traditional polarization metric – modularity – is not a direct measure of antagonism between groups, since non-polarized networks may be also divided into fairly modular communities. To bridge this conceptual gap, we propose a novel polarization metric based on the analysis of the boundary of a pair of (potentially polarized) communities, which better captures the notions of antagonism and polarization. We then characterize

polarizing, polemic issues, specially when new evidences that support one side of the discussion arise, such as the intensity increase associated with the gun control debate after the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut. Social and computer scientists are paying increasing attention to such discussions, seeking for patterns that unveil the dynamics of online debate and the bursts of opinionated content generated in reaction to real-life events. Thus, identifying whether a topic induces polarization on individuals is important for at least three reasons:

1. It is a relevant question from the sociological point of view, since polarization causes segregation and political conflict in the society, as a consequence of the increase of extreme opinions over time and the high degree of bias of polarized opinions (Paul DiMaggio 1996; Mouw and Sobel 2001).

# Bubble Trouble

## Is Web personalization turning us into solipsistic twits?

By *Jacob Weisberg*



51



3



0



Eli Pariser

The first conversation I ever had about the Internet was in 1993 with Robert Wright, who was then a colleague at the *New Republic*.

This "Net" thing was going to be a big deal, I remember Bob telling me, but it could create a few problems. One was that it was going to empower crazies, since geographically

diffuse nut jobs of all sorts would be able to find each other online. Another was that it could hurt democratic culture by encouraging narrow-minded folk to burrow deeper into their holes. Wright spelled out those concerns in an **article** that stands as a model of prescience and a delightful time-capsule. ("People who 'post' on the Net's many different bulletin boards—its 'newsgroups'—know that their words can be seen from just about any chunk of inhabited turf on this planet.")



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Eli Pariser at TED2011

## Beware online "filter bubbles"



### Details

About the talk

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41 languages

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As web companies strive to tailor their services (including news and search results) to our personal tastes, there's a dangerous unintended consequence: We get trapped in a "filter bubble" and don't get exposed to information that could challenge or broaden our worldview. Eli Pariser argues powerfully that this will ultimately prove to be bad for us and bad for democracy.

*This talk was presented at an official TED conference, and was featured by our editors on the home page.*

**4,081,649** views

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March 2011 at TED2011

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### ABOUT



**Eli Pariser** · Organizer and author

Pioneering online organizer Eli Pariser is the author of "The Filter Bubble," about how personalized search might be narrowing our worldview.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/eli\\_pariser\\_beware\\_online\\_filter\\_bubbles](https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles)

**How did we get here?** What do you think was the reasoning behind online platforms promoting/encouraging polarization or selective exposure?

# Class Exercise I

<http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/>

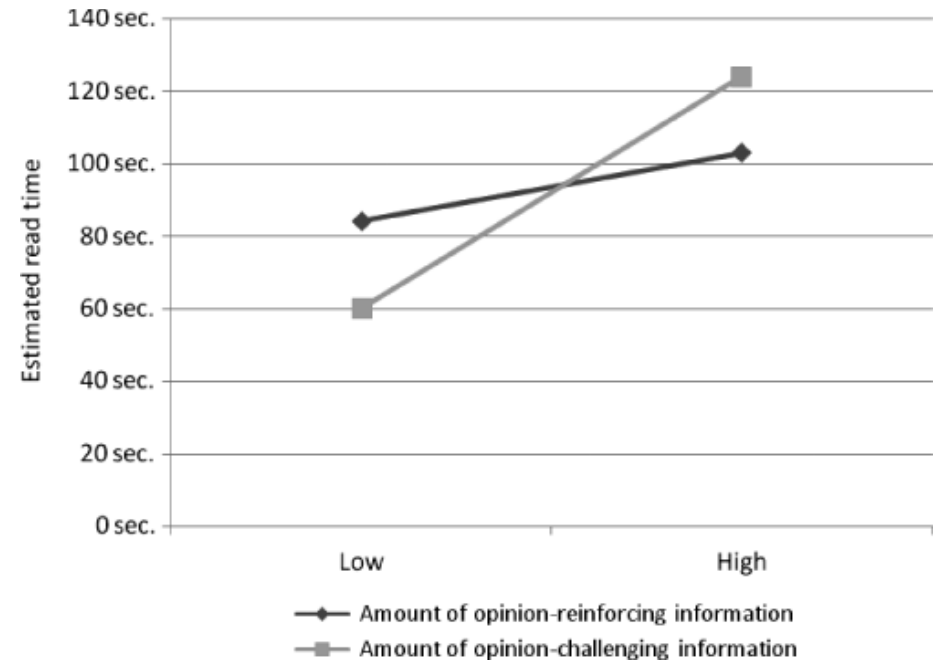
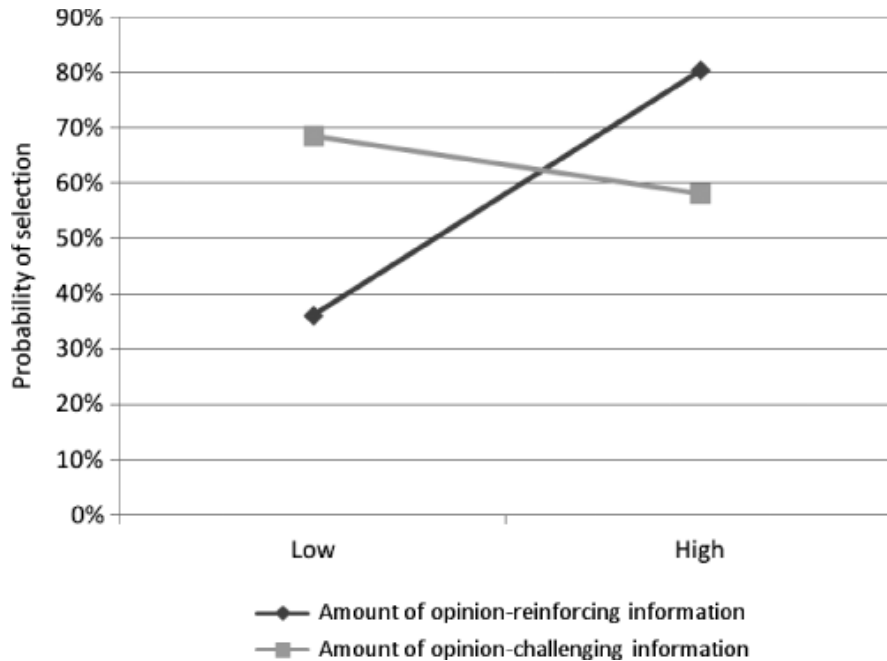


Echo Chambers Online?:  
Politically Motivated Selective  
Exposure among Internet  
News Users

# Summary

- The paper performs a survey study to examine how online news reading affects opinion reinforcement
- 700+ people were asked to read news on two news sites through a web-based behavioral study
  - Individuals more like to read news stories that reinforces their opinions than those which challenge them
- Important finding:
  - Opinion-reinforcing information promotes news story exposure while opinion-challenging information makes exposure only marginally less likely
  - Having decided to view a news story, evidence of an aversion to opinion challenges disappears: There is no evidence that individuals abandon news stories that contain information with which they disagree.
  - People don't actively seek to exclude information that challenges their opinions, unlike what popular knowledge indicated

# Summary (Contd.)



People spend more time looking at the opinion-challenging news items they do choose to read, reflecting a willingness to engage with (though not necessarily be persuaded by) other perspectives



# Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization

Christopher A. Bail<sup>a,1</sup>, Lisa P. Argyle<sup>b</sup>, Taylor W. Brown<sup>a</sup>, John P. Bumpus<sup>a</sup>, Haohan Chen<sup>c</sup>, M. B. Fallin Hunzaker<sup>d</sup>, Jaemin Lee<sup>a</sup>, Marcus Mann<sup>a</sup>, Friedolin Merhout<sup>a</sup>, and Alexander Volfovsky<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Sociology, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708; <sup>b</sup>Department of Political Science, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; <sup>c</sup>Department of Political Science, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708; <sup>d</sup>Department of Sociology, New York University, New York, NY 10012; and <sup>e</sup>Department of Statistical Science, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708

Edited by Peter S. Bearman, Columbia University, New York, NY, and approved August 9, 2018 (received for review March 20, 2018)

**There is mounting concern that social media sites contribute to political polarization by creating “echo chambers” that insulate people from opposing views about current events. We surveyed a large sample of Democrats and Republicans who visit Twitter at least three times each week about a range of social policy issues. One week later, we randomly assigned respondents to a treatment condition in which they were offered financial incentives to follow a Twitter bot for 1 month that exposed them to messages from those with opposing political ideologies (e.g., elected officials, opinion leaders, media organizations, and nonprofit groups). Respondents were resurveyed at the end of the month to measure the effect of this treatment, and at regular intervals throughout the study period to monitor treatment compliance. We find that Republicans who followed a liberal Twitter bot became substantially more con-**

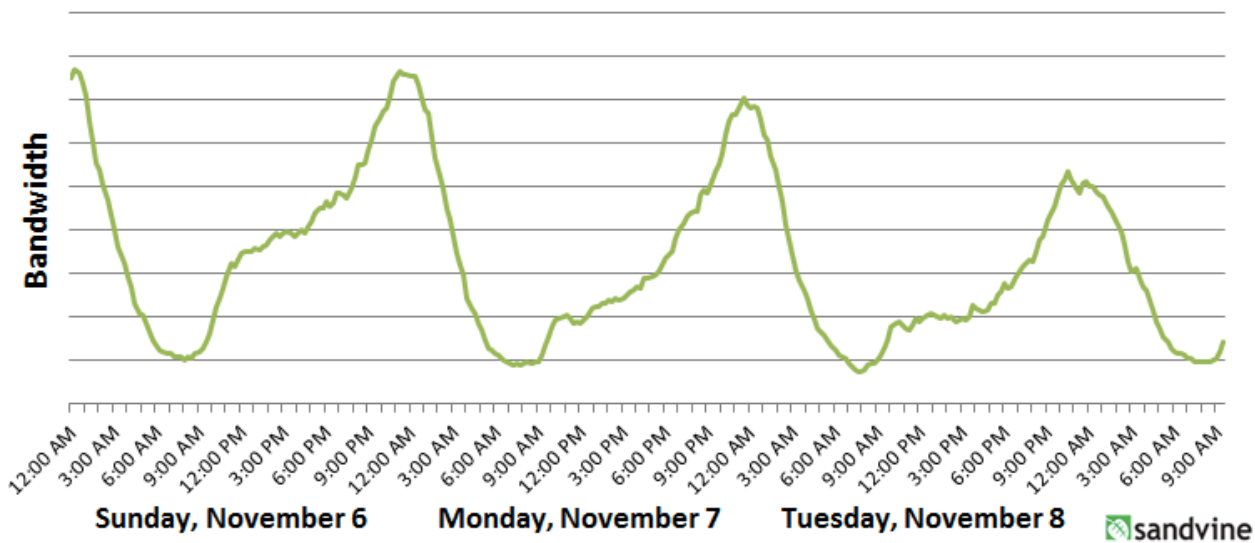
challenges for the study of social media echo chambers and political polarization, since it is notoriously difficult to establish whether social media networks shape political opinions, or vice versa (27–29).

Here, we report the results of a large field experiment designed to examine whether disrupting selective exposure to partisan information among Twitter users shapes their political attitudes. Our research is governed by three preregistered hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that disrupting selective exposure to partisan information will decrease political polarization because of intergroup contact effects. A vast literature indicates contact between opposing groups can challenge stereotypes that develop in the absence of positive interactions between them (30). Studies also indicate intergroup contact increases the likelihood of deliberation and political compromise (31–33). However, all of

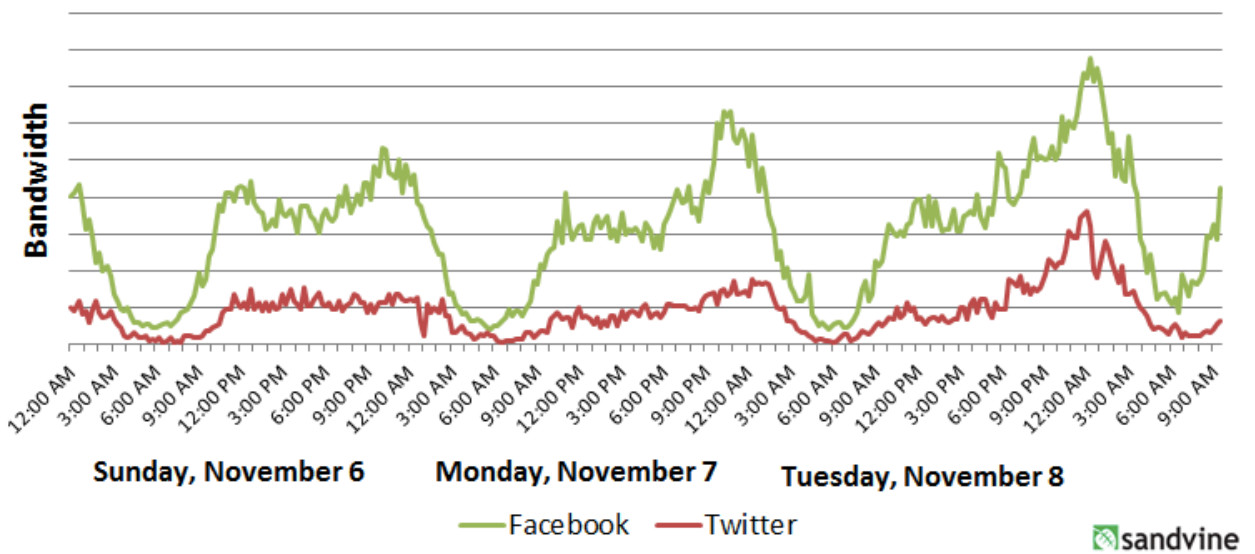
Exposure to ideologically  
diverse news and opinion  
on Facebook

**Influence in the political sphere:** 62% of adults in the US use social media to consume news, and 18% of adults are frequent consumers – Pew Internet

### Netflix Traffic - Sample N. American, Fixed Network



### Social Networking Traffic - Sample N. American, Fixed Network



POLITICS



# Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?

November 8, 2016 · 5:00 AM ET



SAM SANDERS



One happens on Facebook all the time. Just about all of your friends are posting about the election, nonstop. And there are a few who brag about deleting friends, or who urge friends to unfriend them over their political leanings: "Just unfriend me now." Or something like "If you can't support candidate X/Y, we don't need to be friends anymore." Or "Congrats, if you're reading this, you survived my friend purge!"

And then on Twitter, there's the public shaming of those who dare disagree with or insult you. (I am guilty of this.) Someone tweets at you with something incendiary, bashing the article you just shared or the point you just made, mocking something you said about politics, calling you stupid. You quote the tweet, maybe sarcastically, to prove it doesn't affect you. But it does! You tweeted it back, to all of your followers. It's an odd cycle. A rebuttal of nasty political exchanges by highlighting nasty political exchanges.

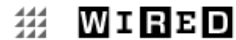


## Facebook

# Facebook's failure: did fake news and polarized politics get Trump elected?

Advertisement

The company is being accused of abdicating its responsibility to clamp down on fake news stories and counter the echo chamber that defined this election



Your Filter Bubble is Destroying Democracy

SIGN IN | SUBSCRIBE

# Your Filter Bubble is Destroying Democracy

## 2016 Presidential Election – Digital Analysis by the Numbers

Hillary Clinton	Criteria	Donald Trump
238.5M	Total Social Media Shares	256.5M
16,633	Average Shares per Post	17,894
8.3M	Facebook Page Likes (Official Page)	12.2M
10.3M	Twitter Following (Official Page)	13.1M
32.9K	Number of Referring Domains	21.4K
1.51M	Number of Backlinks to Website	960K

TECHNOLOGY

# *Facebook, in Cross Hairs After Election, Is Said to Question Its Influence*

By MIKE ISAAC NOV. 12, 2016



**Mark Zuckerberg** ✓

Follow



November 12 at 10:15pm · 🌐

I want to share some thoughts on Facebook and the election.

Our goal is to give every person a voice. We believe deeply in people. Assuming that people understand what is important in their lives and that they can express those views has driven not only our community, but democracy overall. Sometimes when people use their voice though, they say things that seem wrong and they support people you disagree with.

After the election, many people are asking whether fake news contributed to the result, and what our responsibility is to prevent fake news from spreading. These are very important questions and I care deeply about getting them right. I want to do my best to explain what we know here.

Of all the content on Facebook, more than 99% of what people see is authentic. Only a very small amount is fake news and hoaxes. The hoaxes that do exist are not limited to one partisan view, or even to politics. Overall, this makes it extremely unlikely hoaxes changed the outcome of this election in one direction or the other.

That said, we don't want any hoaxes on Facebook. Our goal is to show people the content they will find most meaningful, and people want accurate news. We have already launched work enabling our community to flag hoaxes and fake news, and there is more we can do here. We have made progress, and we will continue to work on this to improve further.

This is an area where I believe we must proceed very carefully though. Identifying the "truth" is complicated. While some hoaxes can be completely debunked, a greater amount of content, including from mainstream sources, often gets the basic idea right but some details wrong or omitted. An even greater volume of stories express an opinion that many will disagree with and flag as incorrect even when factual. I am confident we can find ways for our community to tell us what content is most meaningful, but I believe we must be extremely cautious about becoming arbiters of truth ourselves.

# Zuckerberg Has Thought About the Election and Decided Facebook Is Not to Blame



Rhett Jones

Yesterday 12:39pm · Filed to: HOAXES ▾



15.3K



88



6

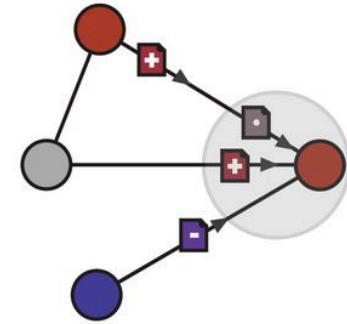
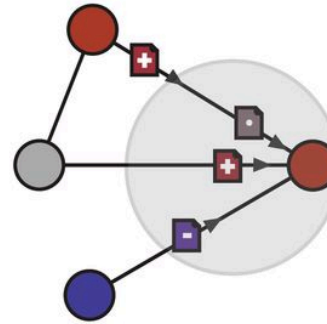
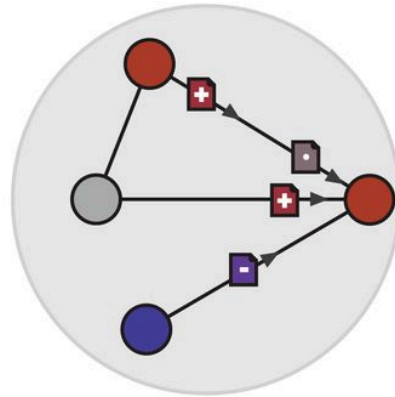


# Summary

- Rigorous work spanning examination of how 10.1 million U.S. Facebook users interact with socially shared news
  - 7 million Web links in 2014-15
  - Hard and soft news
  - Ideological affiliation of a news link based on the average ideological preference of all Facebook users who shared it
- Directly measured ideological homophily in friend networks and examined the extent to which heterogeneous friends could potentially expose individuals to cross-cutting content
  - Examine how users clicked or engaged with ideologically similar or dissimilar content
- Main finding: Compared with algorithmic ranking, individuals' choices played a stronger role in limiting exposure to cross-cutting content.

**A**

Stage in media exposure process

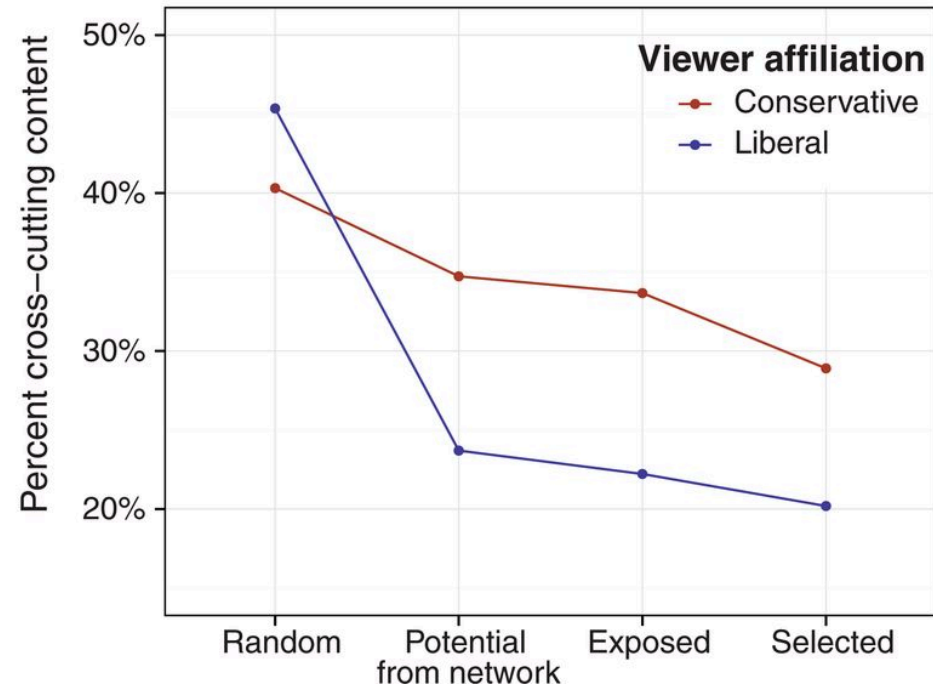
**Potential from network****Exposed****Selected**

Proportion of content that is cross-cutting

1/3

1/2

0/1

**B**

# Class Exercise II

If you were to re-design a tool that works on Facebook to reduce polarization, what would that tool look like? What would it do? What data would it use? How would you evaluate if the tool is working?

# Minimizing Polarization and Disagreement in Social Networks

Cameron Musco  
MIT  
cnmusco@mit.edu

Christopher Musco  
MIT  
cpmusco@mit.edu

Charalampos E. Tsourakakis  
Boston University  
ctsourak@bu.edu

## Abstract

The rise of social media and online social networks has been a disruptive force in society. Opinions are increasingly shaped by interactions on online social media, and social phenomena including disagreement and polarization are now tightly woven into everyday life. In this work we initiate the study of the following question:

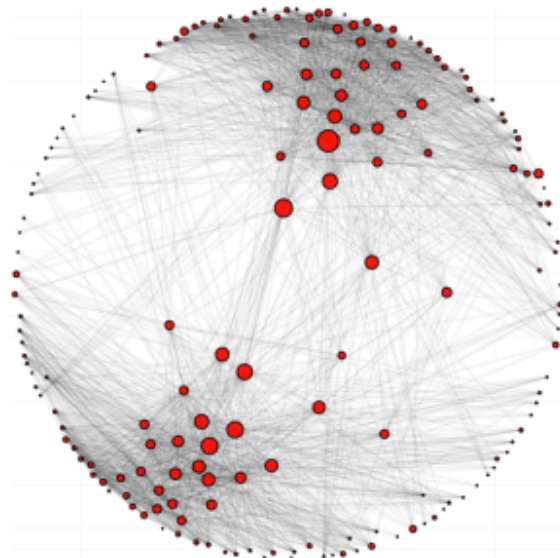
Given  $n$  agents, each with its own initial opinion that reflects its core value on a topic, and an opinion dynamics model, what is the structure of a social network that minimizes *polarization* and *disagreement* simultaneously?

This question is central to recommender systems: should a recommender system prefer a link suggestion between two online users with similar mindsets in order to keep disagreement low, or between two users with different opinions in order to expose each to the other's viewpoint of the world, and decrease overall levels of polarization? Such decisions have an important global effect on society [51]. Our contributions include a mathematical formalization of this question as an optimization problem and an exact, time-efficient algorithm. We also prove that there always exists a network with  $O(n/\epsilon^2)$  edges that is a  $(1 + \epsilon)$  approximation to the optimum.



# How to Burst the "Filter Bubble" that Protects Us from Opposing Views

Computer scientists have discovered a way to number-crunch an individual's own preferences to recommend content from others with opposing views. The goal? To burst the "filter bubble" that surrounds us with people we like and content that we agree with.



The term "filter bubble" entered the public domain back in 2011 when the internet activist Eli Pariser coined it to refer to the way recommendation engines shield people from certain aspects of the real world.

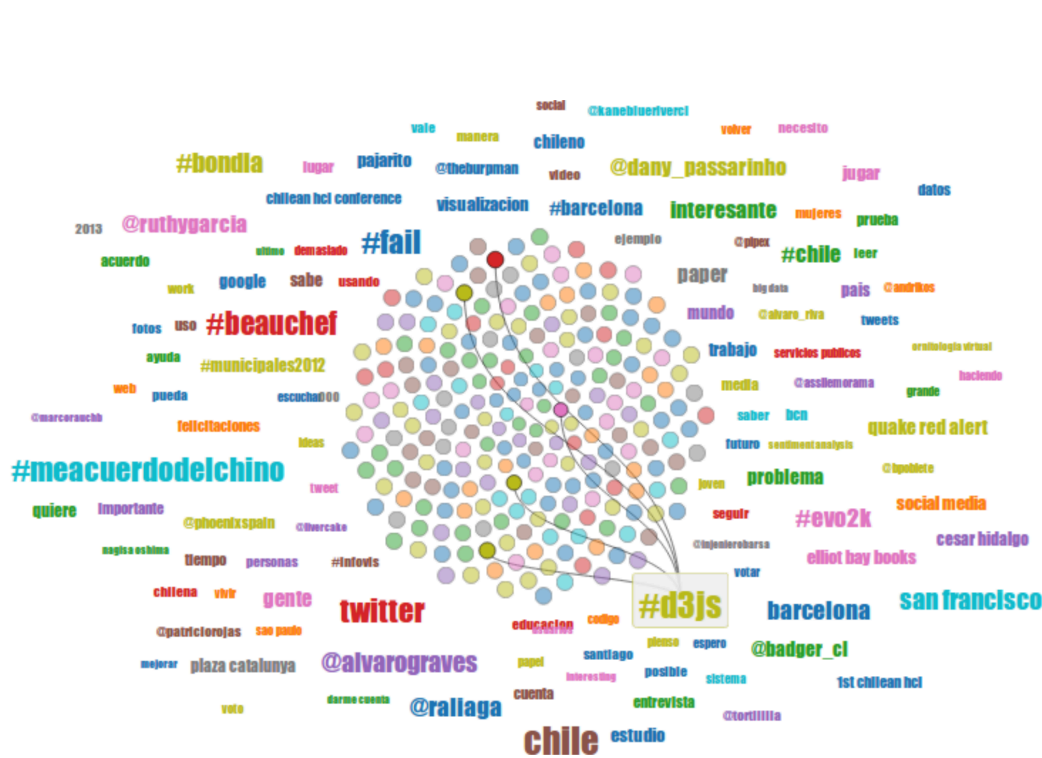
Pariser used the example of two people who googled the term

# Data Portraits: Connecting People of Opposing Views

Eduardo Graells-Garrido  
Universitat Pompeu  
Fabra  
Barcelona, Spain  
eduard.graells@upf.edu

Mounia Lalmas  
Yahoo Labs  
London, UK  
mounia@acm.org

Daniele Quercia  
Yahoo Labs  
Barcelona, Spain  
dquercia@yahoo-inc.com



 **Vero Mansilla** @verito\_mansilla 2 years ago  
Sí hay burbuja: se llama 'community manager' <http://t.co/lyKHU8> vía @el\_pais  
Reply Retweet Favorite

Tweet Recomendado

 **Raul Aliaga Diaz** @raliaga 7 months ago  
WineClr (<http://t.co/2OvXtJk8hm>) busca Community Manager! <http://t.co/P5LEqsQzBJ> favor RT :)  
Reply Retweet Favorite

Reading opinion-reinforcing content can have widespread impact on our perceptions what is real and what is fake. Could this impact our credibility perceptions? – Connection to last week's discussions

# Homophily and polarization in the age of misinformation

Alessandro Bessi<sup>1,2</sup>, Fabio Petroni<sup>3</sup>, Michela Del Vicario<sup>2</sup>, Fabiana Zollo<sup>2</sup>, Aris Anagnostopoulos<sup>3</sup>, Antonio Scala<sup>4</sup>, Guido Caldarelli<sup>2</sup>, and Walter Quattrociocchi<sup>1,a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> IUSS, Pavia, Italy

<sup>2</sup> IMT Institute for Advanced Studies, Lucca, Italy

<sup>3</sup> Sapienza University, Roma, Italy

<sup>4</sup> ISC-CNR, Roma, Italy

Received 1 December 2015 / Received in final form 30 January 2016

Published online 26 October 2016

**Abstract.** The World Economic Forum listed massive digital misinformation as one of the main threats for our society. The spreading of unsubstantiated rumors may have serious consequences on public opinion such as in the case of rumors about Ebola causing disruption to health-care workers. In this work we target Facebook to characterize information consumption patterns of 1.2 M Italian users with respect to verified (science news) and unverified (conspiracy news) contents. Through a thorough quantitative analysis we provide important insights about the anatomy of the system across which misinformation might spread. In particular, we show that users' engagement on verified (or unverified) content correlates with the number of friends having similar consumption patterns (*homophily*). Finally, we measure how this social system responded to the injection of 4,709 false information. We find that the frequent (and selective) exposure to specific kind of

Remember, humans have “agency”, so polarization should have something to do beyond just homophily and network structure. How would you incorporate a user’s intrinsic attributes to discourage polarized views of information?

What makes reducing polarization in social computing systems challenging?

*“Zuckerberg defended the News Feed’s progress arguing that the filter bubble isn’t an issue for Facebook. He suggested the real problem is that people by nature engage with content they like and find agreeable, and dismiss things they don’t agree with online as they would in real life.”* – Techcrunch

To what extent is polarization a new problem with social technologies, as against an offline phenomenon?

A deeper question (from TechCrunch): Why would [Facebook] want to change? And are people even ready for a fair Feed?



Extras

What is the tentative interaction between selective exposure and people's belief systems (with respect to information consumption online)?  
Can we quantify it?