

Facebook not an information bubble, researchers conclude

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Social media networks like Facebook are not putting users in an ideological information bubble, despite fears to the contrary, a new research report said Thursday.

The study published in the journal *Science*, based on an analysis of 10 million Facebook users and seven million web links, found many of the shared stories allowed people to get viewpoints different from their own.

The findings appeared to minimize concerns in some quarters that social networks are leading to political polarization by grouping people along ideological lines and not exposing them to opposing views.

The research, which was led by data scientists from Facebook and the University of Michigan, contained numerous caveats about identifying the ideological bent of users and political leanings inherent in [news](#) stories, but nonetheless suggested that fears of a Facebook information bubble were overblown.

Facebook has been under special scrutiny because it uses algorithms that aim to deliver relevant stories to each user based on their interests.

In a statement, Facebook said the study highlights that its users are getting a variety of viewpoints.

"We found that most people have friends who claim an opposing [political ideology](#), and that the content in people's News Feeds reflect those diverse views," the social network said.



Researchers said algorithms did not appear to be the most significant factor in filtering the news from an ideological perspective, and that "individual choice" played a larger role in limiting exposure to different viewpoints

"News Feed surfaces content that is slightly more aligned with an individual's own ideology, however the friends you choose and the content you click on are more important factors than News Feed ranking in terms of how much content you encounter that cuts across ideological line."

Individual choice is key

In the study, the researchers said the algorithms did not appear to be the most significant factor in filtering the news from an ideological perspective, and that "[individual choice](#)" played a larger role in limiting exposure to different viewpoints.

The study found that Facebook users were exposed to so-called "cross-cutting content"—that liberals got information with a conservative tilt, and vice-versa.

"How much cross-cutting content individuals encounter depends on who their friends are and what information those friends share," the authors wrote.

"If individuals acquired information from random others, approximately 45 percent of the hard content liberals would be exposed to would be cross cutting, compared to 40 percent for conservatives," the study said.

"Despite the slightly higher volume of conservatively aligned articles shared, liberals tend to be connected to fewer friends who share information from the other side."

Facebook said the latest research supports the conclusion of a 2012 study and adds better figures on how shared stories cut across political and ideological lines.

The research, Facebook noted, found that on average 23 percent of people's friends claim an opposing political ideology and that among the news content shared 29.5 percent cuts across ideological lines

"When it comes to what people see in News Feed, 28.9 percent of the hard news encountered cuts across ideological lines, on average 24.9 percent of the hard news content that people actually clicked on cuts across ideological lines," Facebook said.

The research comes amid reports that Facebook is working with news organization to host their [content](#) on its own servers in order to deliver more relevant and timely [information](#) to readers.

A recent Pew Research Center report found some 30 percent of Americans get at least some of their news from Facebook.

More information: Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook, www.sciencemag.org/lookup/doi/10.1126/science.aaa1160

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